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Birkbeck, University of London

**Myths of Empire, Evil, and the Body
in Zola's *Rougon-Macquart***

Kit Yee Wong

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2018

Declaration

I, Kit Yee Wong, declare that this thesis is all my own work.

Signed declaration _____

Date _____

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Zola's use of myth in his *Rougon-Macquart* elucidates the immorality of Napoleon III's Second Empire (1852–70). Focusing on seven novels, it uncovers the political and economic corruption which originates from the moral degeneration of the political body and the bourgeoisie. Using myth as a critical tool, Zola demonstrates that the immorality becomes so extreme that a state of evil has been reached. The corruption is figured as material evil which traverses the Empire in various forms, always denoting death and degeneracy. Zola invokes the myth of original sin — Christianity's definition of evil — but rejects its metaphysical nature by naturalising it as the *fêlure*. The secular *fêlure* provides Zola with a meaningful way of expressing corruption in the modern age because it lies within the human world. Expressed as illness and as a material presence, the *fêlure*, for Zola, must overturn Christianity's metaphysical original sin as the paradigm for human morality. Redemption, or the resolution of evil, is similarly a humanist concept for Zola, and represents the triumph of life over death, and secular justice and hope for the individual and the nation. Chapter 1 compares Zola's *La Débâcle* (1892) with Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892) which linked the body, society, and morality, so that Zola portrays immorality as an illness and natural evil emanating from the emperor's political body. In chapter 2, the degeneracy of the Empire becomes a spatial concept. The 'underground' of modern Paris becomes the space of the *fêlure* which stigmatises the poor. Chapter 3 examines the devastating effects of economic excess in which bourgeois women visibly suffer from degenerative illness and natural evil. Redemption occurs in chapter 4 when the Rougon-Macquart family *fêlure* dissipates through naturalist means, a seam of evil which transmutes into an illness that can be cured.

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References To Works of Émile Zola

Unless otherwise stated, all references to Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* novels are taken from *Les Rougon-Macquart: histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire*, ed. by Armand Lanoux and Henri Mitterand, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1960–67).

Zola's correspondence is taken from the *Correspondance*, ed. by B. H. Bakker and others, 10 vols (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal; Paris, CNRS, 1978–95).

All other references to Zola's works are taken from the *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Henri Mitterand, 15 vols (Paris: Tchou, 'Cercle du Livre Précieux', 1966–70).

Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

Introduction

Zola is primarily known as the leading writer of the Naturalist school, an aesthetic which aimed to apply the discoveries and methods of nineteenth-century science,¹ and, more specifically, the Positivism of Auguste Comte (1798–1857). In this period, there had been huge advances in all scientific fields, especially biology, and the publication of Darwin's theory of evolution in *Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* in 1859 was the most controversial topic of the age. Darwin further elaborated his theory in *The Descent of Man*, published in 1871, where he argued that man was closely related to apes (Furst and Skrine, p. 15). The Naturalists' view of man was directly dependent on the Darwinian concept, and heredity played a cardinal role in Naturalist texts (Furst and Skrine, pp. 16, 17). Zola himself was greatly influenced by Hippolyte Taine's theory of social determinism, whereby the three forces of *race*, *moment* and *milieu* actively shaped the life of the individual. The scientific method in the literary text would depend on the empirical analysis of facts gathered, so that man was an object to be observed, described and analysed in total neutrality. The evil man was on the same plane as the good man because both were conditioned by forces out of their control and not responsible for themselves, therefore highlighting man's amoral position in the scientific age (Furst and Skrine, pp. 14, 20).

In support of his Naturalist stance, Zola writes on the first page of his theoretical manifesto *Le Roman expérimental* that 'je compte, sur tous les points, me retrancher derrière Claude Bernard. Le plus souvent, il me suffira de remplacer le mot "médecin" par le mot "romancier", pour rendre ma pensée claire et lui apporter la rigueur d'une vérité scientifique'.²

The scientific method formed the analytic basis of Zola's depiction of the French Second Empire (1852–1870) in his twenty-volume *Rougon-Macquart* series of novels. He saw this historical period as corrupt and immoral, an era overwhelmed by the social changes brought about by modern industrialisation and the new economics of the age. In the preface to his first *Rougon-Macquart* novel *La Fortune des Rougon* (1871), Zola

1 Lilian R. Furst and Peter N. Skrine, *Naturalism, The Critical Idiom*, 18 (London: Methuen, 1971).

2 Émile Zola, 'Le Roman expérimental', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Henri Mitterand, 15 vols (Paris: Tchou, 'Cercle du Livre Précieux', 1966–70), X (1968), 1175–1401 (p. 1175). Further references to this edition will be given by volume and page number in the text and prefixed OC. Claude Bernard was the scientist who was, for Zola, 'le héros de "la méthode expérimentale et analytique", de la documentation, de la classification et de l'hypothèse'. Cited in Henri Mitterand, 'Préface', in Émile Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, ed. by Henri Mitterand (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), pp. 7–48 (p. 30). Zola was also influenced by Taine and Dr Prosper Lucas.

describes the Second Empire period as ‘une étrange époque de folie et de honte’.³ His portrayal of different sections of Second Empire society was underpinned by meticulous research before each novel was written. However, despite Zola’s ostensible desire for his works to be viewed as scientifically objective Naturalist texts, there is much direct and indirect allusion to the mythological in his fiction. The presence of the mythological in a Naturalist text might seem to be incongruous, and points to a discrepancy between Zola’s manifesto and his novels.

At this point, it is important to understand what is meant by myth, which is open to multiple definitions. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as ‘a traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon’. It gives a second definition of myth as ‘a widespread but untrue or erroneous story or belief; a widely held misconception; a misrepresentation of the truth’. In addition to these definitions, according to Robert A. Segal, there are religious and secular myths.⁴ In the nineteenth century, myth was taken to be the ‘primitive’ counterpart to science, which was assumed to be wholly modern. Science rendered myth not merely redundant, but outright incompatible, so that moderns, who by definition are scientific, had to reject myth (Segal, p. 3). This division between science and myth was widespread: because many myths appear to be about putative matters of fact (e.g. about the origins of the cosmos, or of death) and are often aetiological (giving an account of the reasons why events or objects, etc., came into being), it has seemed obvious to the modern mind that, if the explanations are shown to be false, so too have myths been shown to be erroneous. Myths, therefore, are defective accounts of putative matters of fact which can now be improved upon.⁵

Despite the division between myth and science in the nineteenth century, and taking into account Zola’s Naturalist credo, which espouses the scientific method, this thesis argues that Zola saw the great potential of using myth in his novels. Paradoxically, it serves his Naturalism in offering a moral perspective that cannot be

3 Émile Zola, ‘Préface’, in ‘La Fortune des Rougon’, in *Les Rougon-Macquart: histoire naturelle et sociale d’une famille sous le Second Empire*, ed. by Armand Lanoux and Henri Mitterand, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, ‘Bibliothèque de la Pléiade’, 1960–67), I (1960), 3–4 (p. 4). Further references to this edition will be given by volume and page number in the text and prefixed *RM*.

4 Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 137.

5 *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, ed. by John Bowker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Ebook.

possible in the neutral telling of a story to which Naturalism aspires. The necessary absence of the authorial voice in the Naturalist aesthetic which strives for objectivity rather than subjectivity may be supplemented to some extent by the use of myth, which provides a moral voice. It is this moral voice in the guise of myth which allows the reader an emotional purchase on an ostensibly Naturalist text, and it underlines the depravity of the Second Empire in an economically literary way. Zola's link to the general cultural storehouse of myth takes the depiction of an historical period, which could so easily be a mere diatribe against corruption, to a meaningful human level. Therefore, Zola's wish to illustrate the corruption of the Second Empire is rendered more powerful in exploiting the inherent force of myth. While it might be instructive for the reader to be given an objective description of a mine for a better understanding of the working life of a miner, for example, the text can operate on more than one level if the mythical imagination is also engaged. The use of myth in many of the *Rougon-Macquart* novels helps convey the sheer tumultuousness of living in the Second Empire. Napoleon III's reign during this time is shown to support the moneymaking ambitions of the bourgeoisie. This financial imperative splits society into two: those who are, or who wish to be, moneymakers versus those who suffer in different ways because of the corrosive effects of capitalism. The deleterious effects on the individual are so harsh that it would seem that Zola is demonstrating existential suffering on the part of the victims of capitalism. It is the deepest suffering from which there appears to be no escape, and, damagingly, may come to be viewed as 'natural' through its insidious pervasiveness. It is through his use of myth to bolster Naturalist description that Zola can reveal what is fundamentally at stake for society and humankind when extreme capitalism runs riot. Myth provides an opportunity to show the depth of human suffering from Second Empire corruption so, as a social commentator, Zola's use of myth would seem to be deliberate.

Myth as epistemology

Since Zola writes on what he considers to be matters of evil — such is the depth of Second Empire immorality — this thesis will examine his systematic use of myth as an epistemology. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines epistemology as 'the theory of knowledge and understanding, and the distinction between justified belief and opinion'.

As a Naturalist writer, having myth as a category of knowledge offers Zola a conceptual framework from which it is possible to both discuss and perceive evil as a reality in the modern, scientific age. Evil, as an acknowledged worldly entity, is thus no longer an abstract concept. In the *Rougon-Macquart*, Zola's sustained and distinctive use of myth transforms it into a tool of critique of Second Empire morality.

Zola's construction of myth as epistemology includes the notion of redemption, which is also expressed in the secular mode. The thesis will trace the movement of evil to redemption through the *Rougon-Macquart*. Zola's redemption is purely humanist, which ultimately envisages a thriving humanity advancing into the future. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines humanism as

any system of thought or ideology which places humans, or humanity as a whole, at its centre, *esp.* one which is predominantly concerned with human interests and welfare, and stresses the inherent value and potential of human life [...]; a rejection of theistic religion and the supernatural in favour of secular and naturalistic views of humanity and the universe.

Clearly, Zola's humanism corresponds with his Naturalist aesthetic because of its absolute focus on the human. His secular redemption aims for a healthy French nation which is free from the immorality of the Second Empire. It is based on the natural advancement of the generations, developing organically and in perpetuity. The betterment of humanity and its problems through its own means is at the core of Zola's redemption.

Zola's invoking of evil in the *Rougon-Macquart* inevitably must involve Christianity's definition of evil. The religious evil of original sin has its secular counterpart in Zola's *fêlure*, which will be discussed later, but Zola's Naturalistic treatment of it means that it is a material, rather than a metaphysical, evil. Correspondingly, Christian redemption is different from Zola's. It is

a biblical and traditional metaphor for describing the saving work of Jesus in delivering humanity from sin and evil [...]. It was simply taken for granted that it was only through Christ that human beings could be saved [...]. The pervading presence of evil and sin established the universal need of redemption. Human beings were understood to be enslaved by hostile, cosmic powers [...] and to live under the shadow of death [...]. The heart of evil is personal sin, a condition that affects all people [...] and is a tyrannical master enslaving human beings [...]. At times the Bible portrays our sinful condition as that of those who are defiled and in need of cleansing.⁶

The evil which concerns Christian redemption is metaphysical, and contrasts with

⁶ *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, ed. by Adrian Hastings and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 598–99.

Zola's secular redemption which is concerned with political and moral justice. While religious sin and its resolution do not even exist from a secular perspective, Zola's redemptive force of political justice is firmly rooted within the human world. Zola's redemption is, moreover, an expression of life and physical and moral health for the individual and the nation. Myth as a form of critique in the *Rougon-Macquart* can also be applied to his later series *Les Trois Villes* and *Les Quatre Évangiles*.

Myth of the Second Empire body: organic evil, illness and cure

There have been many critical responses to the theme of myth in the *Rougon-Macquart* novels. Much attention has been focused on the presence of Greek, Roman, and other classical mythologies in the novels. Some critics have concentrated on the influence of Freud's psychoanalytical theories, while others signal Zola's reliance on Christian myths and his endorsement of the nineteenth-century 'myths' of female hysteria and prostitution. Others have underlined Zola's own status as mythographer. With so many critical approaches to mythology in Zola's novels, it is clear that his Naturalist texts are anything other than neutral. This thesis will take a wider consideration of myth by focusing on the political myth set up by Napoleon III's regime, and discussing its manifestations in the body as a metonymy of the corruption of the Second Empire. Zola's *fêlure* is a key concept which encapsulates the multifaceted use of myth in his novels, a paradigm which has been interpreted by critics in a variety of ways, notably by Gilles Deleuze, who will be discussed later. This thesis will consider myth in two related ways: the *fêlure* as a secular original sin, or natural evil, and also the bourgeois myth of progress constructed by the Second Empire, a progress that generates a corruption that produces the *fêlure*. Little critical consideration has so far been given to Zola's use of myth as a moral voice, and this thesis will explore this aspect further. The nineteenth-century 'myth' of degeneration which focuses on the pathological degradation of the body, society and morality will also be discussed. Degeneration provides the environment which helps the *fêlure* to proliferate.

This thesis focuses on the moral effects of the Second Empire as a corrupt political regime on its citizens, and how Zola's use of mythology, particularly in relation to the body and through his concept of the *fêlure*, is able to convey this. The sub-title of the *Rougon-Macquart* series is 'Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le

Second Empire', and it reflects the equal importance of the natural and the social within the novels. They each trace the parallel forces which affect the Rougon-Macquart family, moving in tandem through the entire series. In the novels, social corruption eventually manifests itself as the natural, or physiological, so this thesis will study myth primarily as a naturalistic phenomenon. The body and its physiology is all-important to demonstrate the denaturing effect of the Second Empire's corruption on individuals: it manifests itself as a physical symptom and illness. The body harbours the appetites which intensify under the regime, but they are both harmful for the individuals themselves and, ultimately, for the Second Empire as they transmute into disease and infection. However, the effects of corruption are not confined to its emerging as illness in the body. Physiological impairment develops into profound moral impairment, and this could be seen as a secular original sin running as a physiological seam through the bodies of the five generations of the Rougon-Macquart family. This phenomenon is known as the *fêlure* in Zola criticism, combining the physiological, the social, and the moral. As with the Christian myth of the Garden of Eden where Eve's misdemeanour is punished by God by the establishing of original sin for the rest of humankind, the Rougon-Macquart family's secular original sin may be evidence of some kind of punishment. Therefore, it will be necessary to acknowledge the relationship between moral evil and natural evil: the immoral act results in the suffering of natural evil as punishment. This thesis will consider the dangerous nature of the organic body under the Second Empire, which is in contrast to the artificial, inorganic structure of the regime itself. However, the backdrop of degeneration erodes Napoleon III's regime, so that its deliberate artifice cannot possibly be sustained. There will be some discussion of Greek mythology, not least because there are direct allusions to it in some of the novels under examination. There has been much critical attention on Zola's use of Greek myth, but it is necessary to refer to this selectively because his mythical allusions are usually from more than one source, and it is not unusual for different mythologies to be present in a single novel. Therefore, to speak of Zola's use of myth is to acknowledge the sheer range of myths he invokes and the multifaceted ways in which myth can be understood in the context of his novels.

Zola's perspective from the Third Republic (1870–1940)

This thesis analyses the presence of the *fêlure* and degenerative sickness in seven of the novels from Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, all set in Napoleon III's Second Empire (1852–70). It is important to keep in mind that these works had been written during the Third Republic, which was after the period in which they were set. In looking back to the Second Empire in his novels, it is possible to identify some of the cultural anxieties of the Third Republic that seem to have found a presence in Zola's work. The republican author is critiquing the excesses of the previous regime, but he is also projecting, within his work, fears about the state of the nation and its citizens during the Third Republic.

The question of 'selves' became important after the French Revolution, when individuals mattered in new ways. No longer monarchical subjects, they were democratic citizens, and sovereign actors in the political and social spheres. While monarchical subjects were born, democratic citizens had to be made. Virtually every area of public and professional life was engaged in this effort, but medicine, especially, played a critical role in the 'social hygiene' of French society.⁷ Throughout the nineteenth century, French doctors, particularly those in the field of mental medicine, saw themselves as stewards of political and cultural health (Reed, pp. 71–72). As the influence of mental medicine reached its peak in the Third Republic, groups such as Communards, criminals, alcoholics, and hysterics were classed as deviants and dangerous 'others'. However, the leaders of the Third Republic were keen to project an image of bourgeois rationality and strength (Reed, p. 79).

The Third Republic witnessed much change which created deep social divisions. As the extreme Left grew in the years after 1880, it divided into two main strands. One worked within the existing parliamentary system, but the other refused to deal with what they termed 'the bourgeois state', hoping to overthrow the system in order to replace it with a collectivist state. For several years in the early 1890s there were individual acts of violence against prominent members of the republican regime. The most serious was the stabbing to death in 1894 of Sadi Carnot, the fourth President of

7 Matt T. Reed, 'From aliéné to dégénéré: Moral Agency and the Psychiatric Imagination in Nineteenth-Century France', in *Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle France: Bodies, Minds and Gender*, ed. by Christopher E. Forth and Elinor Accampo (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 67–89 (p. 71). For more on 'social hygiene', see Dora B. Weiner, *The Citizen-Patient in Revolutionary and Imperial Paris* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) and W. F. Bynum, *Science and the Practice of Medicine in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

the Republic. The trade unions later took up the cause when it was made legal to form *syndicats* in 1884. The movement to overthrow the state by means of the trade unions — revolutionary syndicalism — was at its height between 1905 and 1908.⁸ It was also a time of economic instability. The European depression of the 1880s was made more severe in France by *laissez-faire* prejudice. Profits and prices fell, and unemployment rose to over ten per cent. This did not change until the next economic boom in 1896. There was also great social change, with socialist and feminist movements producing ‘disorder’ in the country.⁹ In 1884, divorce was legalised (Birkett, p. 13). In the midst of all this uncertainty, conformism was what the Republic required: its ‘citizens were for use, not ornament’ (Birkett, p. 14).

The idea that France was in a state of *dégénérescence* should be understood, according to Daniel Pick, as an ‘ideological production, a complex process of conceptualising a felt crisis of history’.¹⁰ Degeneration moved from being a sub-current of political or economic theories to become the centre of scientific and medical investigation. Works on degeneration were very often written by those qualified as doctors, anthropologists, and zoologists, so they had the appearance of being natural scientific truth. What was hitherto considered to be a religious, philosophical, or ethical problem became a medical, biological, or physical anthropological fact (Pick, p. 20). Degeneration was also increasingly seen not as the social condition of the poor, but as a self-reproducing force which caused crime, destitution, and disease (Pick, p. 21). For Pick, degeneration and social evolution in the later nineteenth century turned between an ideal fiction of unity and a dread of cultural, national, and racial disintegration (p. 42). With national unity in mind, it was the duty of social medicine to restore the sanctity of the family, the ‘symbolic locus of society’s fundamental order’ (Pick, pp. 72–73).

In what Karen Offen calls a ‘biotheology’, medical men (with a few exceptions) used their scientific credibility to counter women’s power and influence by attempting to ‘prove’ women’s physical (‘biological’) and mental inferiority.¹¹ The Enlightenment’s

8 Keith Randell, *France: The Third Republic, 1870–1914* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), pp. 88–89.

9 Jennifer Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers: Decadence in France 1870–1914* (London: Quartet Books, 1986), p. 11.

10 Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848–c. 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 54.

11 Karen Offen, ‘Is the “Woman Question” Really the “Man Problem”?’ in *Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle France: Bodies, Minds and Gender*, ed. by Christopher E. Forth and Elinor Accampo (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 43–62 (p. 44).

discursive construction of the citizen had embodied the citizen as public man in opposition to private woman, whose ‘natural’ domain was the home. A masculine universal had been constructed by creating a feminine ‘other’.¹² The medical profession helped reinforce this in the biomedical model, which fitted with their materialist and anticlerical thinking. This tendency was strongest during the Third Republic (Sowerwine, p. 29). Jack D. Ellis has shown that doctors were the second largest single professional group in the Chamber of Deputies between 1870 and 1914 (cited in Sowerwine, p. 29), so the subordination of women also crossed over to the legislative arena. The population of France was an important question for the Third Republic after the Franco-Prussian War. Already lower in number to the now-united Germans, the French population was growing at one-third the German rate, and marriages were steadily declining (by 20 per cent between 1872 and the end of that decade).¹³

As a dedicated republican, Zola is concerned about the Republic being the best it can be. In his depiction of the Second Empire as a period suffering from political degeneration — a literal corruption from the body of Napoleon III — it is a warning to the Third Republic that nations can fall because of their corrupt politicians. Morality, moreover, is an issue for every individual, and every degenerate act contributes to an unhealthy environment which would eventually lead to a genuine collapse of the nation. As part of this message, Zola is also warning that the breakdown of the family will harm the nation: if women stray from their domestic duties in any way, this would represent a further decline. Degeneration affects the health of the nation and of individual bodies, and the solution, for Zola, centres around a republic with politicians working in unity for the good of the nation and stable family structures. Without the corruption of the Second Empire, figured as a natural evil in Zola’s novels, the Third Republic would be approaching ‘perfection’. Zola’s *Rougon-Macquart* novels, then, are a warning to the Third Republic of what has happened in the past, and what may happen in the future if historical lessons are ignored.

12 Charles Sowerwine, ‘Revising the Sexual Contract: Women’s Citizenship and Republicanism in France, 1789–1944’, in *Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle France: Bodies, Minds and Gender*, ed. by Christopher E. Forth and Elinor Accampo (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 19–42 (p. 20). For more on the Enlightenment’s construction of the woman citizen, see Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988); Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Madelyn Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

13 Eugen Weber, *France: Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 23.

Previous critical responses to myth in Zola's novels

As I have already noted, there have been many critical responses to the presence of myth in Zola's novels. The different kinds of myth range from classical references, the Freudian perspective, nineteenth-century myths about women, to Christian myth. Below is a selective review of these responses.

i) Greek, archetypal and classical myth

The eminent Zola critic Henri Mitterand describes the figure of the 'eternal return', a prominent feature in the novels, as 'la prégnance souvent observable de la temporalité du mythe sur celle de l'histoire'.¹⁴ For Mitterand, myth and history are interconnected, and myth has an equally valid and active presence in society as history. He adds that Zola's stories contain some 'bribes' of myths and are 'bricolages mytho-romanesques' (*Naturalisme*, p. 86). This observation of Zola's use of the mythological, as a textual presence and a passage towards a higher narrative level beyond history, is supported by Mitterand's writing about the first *Rougon-Macquart* novel which shows the social repercussions in the provincial town of Plassans during Napoleon III's *coup d'état*: he writes that the mythical archetypes being established 'ne sont pas, n'ont jamais été ceux de l'histoire' (*Naturalisme*, p. 87). Clearly, for Mitterand, the mythological represents its own universe and should be treated as a dynamic narrative strand in itself. For Mitterand, this follows through to particular Zolian novelistic characters. For example, he describes the courtesan figure Nana as a unique type who appears in all mythologies: 'la féminité fascinante et perverse qui exploite la concupiscence qu'elle fait naître, vide l'homme de sa force et le détruit' (*Naturalisme*, p. 90). Regarding Zola's use of myth, Mitterand describes him as being 'Greek without acknowledging it, even without knowing it, but fundamentally so' in his use of archetypal characters and actions like those of most ancient tales.¹⁵

While Mitterand sees the mythological level as interconnected with the historical level, where history commingles with archetypal Greek myth, this interpretation of Zola's use of myth is too limiting because it does not take account of myth being

14 Henri Mitterand, *Zola et le naturalisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986), p. 84.

15 Henri Mitterand, 'Zola the Greek', in *Émile Zola: Fiction and Modernity*, trans. and ed. by Monica Lebron and David Baguley (London: The Émile Zola Society and Birkbeck College, University of London, 2000), pp. 9–17 (p. 10).

generated within modern history and society. While there will be some discussion of ancient myths, this thesis will treat myth as a creation within the historical moment of the Second Empire. I shall also be considering Zola's use of the contemporary myth of degeneration and his own myth of the *fêlure*. This will be explored through all four chapters, which will be on the degeneration of the Second Empire regime, the immoral topography of the city of Paris, women, and religion. Bourgeois decadence is transformed into a pathological and moral sickness emanating from the body of Napoleon III, which affects the whole of Second Empire society; Haussmann's rebuilding of Paris represents the bourgeois myth of eternal progress in which the new city topography attempts to eradicate the presence of the past from the continuum of time; the denatured minds and bodies of women suffer from the rapacious materialism of the Second Empire, their exploited desires expressed as sickness; and the *fêlure*, analogous to Christianity's original sin, is naturalised as an illness, and finally 'cured'.

Philip Walker also sees archetypal myth in Zola's work. In particular, he cites the myths of blood and of catastrophe,¹⁶ which are part of Zola's 'mythopoeism' (*Zola*, p. 26). As part of this feature of his work, Zola develops themes which are traditionally associated with myth, such as world creation, destruction and renewal, and descents into earth. Walker notes that Zola often exploits classical and Judeo-Christian myth to express his own radically modern vision (*Zola*, p. 28), Zola's modernity being no less dramatic and violent. Walker describes Zola as a poet whose use of figurative language to portray reality expresses his poetic vision (*Zola*, p. 17). The archetypal blood and catastrophe to which Walker refers are, in this thesis, set within the historical bounds of the Second Empire. In this new context, the myth of blood becomes the myth of the *fêlure*, and the myth of catastrophe becomes the nineteenth-century myth of degeneration. Both are at the base of the corruption which permeates the Second Empire, which the thesis treats as a naturalistic phenomenon. This material corruption is the cause of the disastrous Franco-Prussian War, an event glimpsed at the end of *Nana* (1880), and the consequences of which are shown in their full horror in *La Débâcle* (1892). Walker notes Zola's figurative language as the expression of a poetic vision, but my focus on the Second Empire transforms the figurative evil of the regime into physiological evil. This representation of evil will be discussed in all four chapters, and constitutes a modern re-telling of the archetypal myths of blood and catastrophe. Blood is the medium in which the *fêlure* is carried, and it is this flaw which wreaks so much

16 Philip D. Walker, *Émile Zola* (London: Routledge, 1968), p. 11.

destruction in the *Rougon-Macquart* novels. The myth of the *fêlure* is doubly damaging in the context of the contemporary myth of degeneration, which expresses the national decline of the French nation under Napoleon III. It is a decline which is both moral and physiological, and originates from the body of Napoleon III himself.

Alfred C. Proulx also regards Zola as a poet in the most 'élevé'¹⁷ sense, as his epic range allows for a new and powerful vision which leads man to a wider understanding of himself and his surroundings. For Proulx, Zola writes about the great forces of life, death, fecundity, and sterility, which must be veiled in mystery if they are to equal the powerful and suggestive 'énigme' of myths (Proulx, p. 81). Proulx considers Zola's myths as 'une réalité supérieure contre laquelle se projettent les événements d'une réalité inférieure'. They are all variants on the great conflict between Life and Death, Hope and Disaster, Work or Creativity and Destruction, and Fecundity and Sterility. These forces are part of a 'mouvement éternel' and ultimately combine into 'une vaste force' (Proulx, p. 106). For Proulx, it is Zola's 'vision poétique hyperbolique' which is able to create a world above and yet of this world, and which finally gives the *Rougon-Macquart* its 'souffle épique' (Proulx, p. 159). The power wielded by Proulx's mythical great forces translates into the mysterious force of the Second Empire in this thesis, shaping the life of the individual. The regime's denaturing of the human body and its repressive manipulation of urban space in Paris means that Proulx's great forces of life and death are everyday material realities imposed on the citizens. The cycle of life and death identified by Proulx becomes arrested into a continuous experience of death during the Second Empire reign. This will be discussed in all four chapters of the thesis, whereby the movement is from deathly degeneration in chapter 1 to a state of revitalisation of life in chapter 4. This progression is a mythical one because Zola's conception of life and death is identified with the principles of good and evil. The movement from death to life, and from evil to good, then becomes a moral progression.

In a similar way to Philip Walker and Alfred C. Proulx, Guy Robert writes on Zola's poetic temperament and the epic aspect of *Les Rougon-Macquart*. He considers the destiny of the Rougon-Macquart family to be influenced by 'le jeu de deux principes hostiles', which are closely intertwined: there is the 'mouvement ascensionnel' and an opposing force which causes 'la chute et les décompositions qui précèdent l'anéantissement'.¹⁸ Additionally, in novels such as *La Curée* (1872), there are 'des

17 Alfred C. Proulx, *Aspects épiques des 'Rougon-Macquart' de Zola* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), p. 47.

18 Guy Robert, *Émile Zola: principes et caractères généraux de son œuvre* (Paris: Société D'Édition Les Belles Lettres, 1952), p. 96.

points de corruption' (Robert, p. 96). On the downward trajectory of decomposition, Robert considers the Second Empire in *Nana* to be infected by 'la peste noire' (Robert, p. 98) before its collapse. In this novel, Nana herself incarnates the myth of 'la Catastrophe' (Robert, p. 98). There is also the myth of 'le Châtiment' (Robert, p. 103) in *La Débâcle*. However, Robert notes that there is the myth of 'l'Espérance' (Robert, p. 101) to counter the path of annihilation. The notions of good and evil which I will be focusing upon are, for Robert, opposing 'principles'. His description is very general, as are his mythical classifications of 'Catastrophe', 'Punishment', and 'Hope'. Where my thesis proposes degeneration as one of the causes of the Second Empire's downfall — a material, Naturalist corruption — Robert's terms are metaphorical. His description of Zola's *fêlure* is also metaphorical, in that it is described as an 'effet d'un mal interne' (Robert, p. 104). Robert describes the decadence of bourgeois Paris in *La Curée* as 'l'atmosphère' which corrupts Saccard's soul, and poisons Renée's and Maxime's (Robert, p. 105). Although this is accurate, the description of bourgeois corruption is much more damaging to the individual. Hence, this thesis will place more emphasis on the myth of the *fêlure* as a principle of evil with a specifically physiological nature.

The importance of myth as a vital element in Zola's novels is noted by Roger Ripoll, who considers the many kinds of myth that are present in his work.¹⁹ For this critic, one finds 'la vérité' (I, 1) of Zola's novels within the different mythologies that are deployed. He states that it is important to go beyond the pure content of myths when thinking about how Zola incorporates them, as a literal interpretation would only generate a seeming incoherence in his thought (II, 923). Myth, for Ripoll, is not a series of symbols but is, instead, an integral part of the narrative form. It is the action of superior forces on man, expressing 'le jeu des grandes forces' (I, 10), but Ripoll writes that myth should not be confused with allegory either (I, 10). As in the case of symbols, allegory is not a simple sign as it carries a sense which it conserves, even if it is used to signify something else. Ripoll agrees with Guy Robert's three definitions of what constitutes the great myths in Zola's work (the concrete translation of manifestations of reality; the value of eternity; dramatic form, or movement capable of conveying the dynamism of the universe), but he states that, while they offer a useful inventory of myth in the *Rougon-Macquart*, they do not distinguish between different aspects of myth or its significance. However, he observes that Robert's definitions do convey the notion that myth has different values. For Ripoll, mythical thought is of a different order

19 Roger Ripoll, *Réalité et mythe chez Zola*, 2 vols (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1981).

from historical thought, which are in opposition to each other (I, 16). However, myth and history cannot be separated as Ripoll sees mythical creation as inseparable from its time and historical conditions, so Zola's writing after Romanticism means that the symbolism of myth is no longer desirable. Instead, myths 'traduiraient la perception instinctive des forces de la nature par l'imagination collective' (I, 17–18). Literature reconstructs myths, and, 'ainsi rénovés sont appelés [...] à traduire les aspects essentiels de la vie naturelle et de l'histoire' (I, 18). Thus, Ripoll writes that the scientific model and mythical creation 'loin de s'opposer, sont liées l'une à l'autre' (I, 18). Indeed, Ripoll emphasises that Zola's recourse to myth is not innocent, but has a political function (I, 18).

In Zola's novelistic critique of Second Empire society, Ripoll identifies the degradation of the gods on stage in *Nana* as a symbol of the period's decadent values and social corruption (I, 75). On the instances of biblical divine punishments and imagery of the Christian hell in the novels, Ripoll interprets them as a 'projection d'un inexorable sentiment de culpabilité', while pagan divinities represent the internal impulses that society represses (I, 102). Ripoll notes Zola's moral use of the myths of evil and punishment, and sees this broadened to the social and political arena in *Germinal* when *la faute* becomes suffering, so myth in *Germinal* becomes social critique (I, 99, 100). Ripoll recognises Zola's myths of life and death, identified in various forms by other critics, as illness and vitality. He notes that Zola's myth of the sickly society depicted in *La Débâcle* is influenced by Claude Bernard's theory of the human body as analogous to society, so that any moral, economic or political disorder is interpreted in terms of pathology (I, 323). This is counteracted by Ripoll's identification of Zola's mythical 'cycle vital' (II, 910). This cycle encompasses the physiological as well as the mythical because *la faute* may be 'lavée' as the cycle revolves eternally to join origins to the future (II, 912). Ripoll writes that, through the myth of the vital cycle, evil 'finit par perdre toute réalité' (II, 915). In harmony with this, 'l'histoire est aussitôt achevée que commencée' (II, 915), so Pascal and Clotilde's newborn son in *Le Docteur Pascal* (1893) symbolises the fusion of death and rebirth. As the vital cycle makes its revolution, Ripoll proposes that the baby 'annule toute l'histoire des Rougon-Macquart' (II, 915).

Ripoll's focus on Zola's myth needing to translate 'natural life and history' on behalf of his era recognises Zola's desire to explore the contemporary through the natural. His *Rougon-Macquart* novels are a study of the corruption of the Second

Empire, and Ripoll's highlighting of Zola's use of Claude Bernard's physiological theory of society as being analogous to the human body provides a good foundation for the understanding of all the novels. My thesis, however, brings in the wider theory of degeneration as the background which helps explain the corruption of the Second Empire. I also identify a connection between the human body and society, but I attribute the source of the corruption specifically to Napoleon III and the bourgeoisie. This corruption is to be understood as political and economic, and both stem from a failure of morality. This degeneracy will be treated as a naturalistic phenomenon throughout the thesis, so that it is first figured as an illness, and the increasing magnitude of the decadent behaviour morphs the illness into natural evil. This evil, also known as original sin, may itself be understood as a Christian physiological phenomenon, and Zola's version of it is the *fêlure*. Ripoll notes Zola's use of *la faute* as social suffering in *Germinal*, but I will develop his metaphorical interpretation of this into a material condition, so that suffering is made evident by the presence of natural evil. The interpretation of evil in this thesis is influenced by the Augustinian theory of retribution: all suffering is merited because it is a punishment for an individual or collective sin. As the theory prescribes, natural evil cannot exist without moral evil, or, the punishment of suffering exists because a sin has been committed. This, then, emphasises the particular role of Second Empire decadent behaviour in being an instigator of moral evil. Zola's 'vital cycle', as Ripoll describes it, becomes, in this thesis, an acknowledgement of the drive towards life. I will show this Zolian myth to be more than an abstract concept, as this movement towards life will be formulated as a naturalistic occurrence. Ripoll writes that *la faute* will be washed away in the revolution of the vital cycle which will ensure it loses 'toute réalité'. *La faute*, in my thesis, will be dissipated in its bleeding-away from Charles Rougon's body, so it will disappear by natural means. Ripoll considers the presence of biblical divine punishments and imagery of the Christian hell to be projections of guilt and fear due to Zola's early religious instruction. This thesis will, however, show that these Christian allusions are a valid social commentary in the form of *la faute* or Zola's secular *fêlure*.

ii) Freudian myth

Jean Borie moves away from the poetic dimension of myth, focusing instead on the material and the human body.²⁰ He describes Zola's progression from 'la Nausée et de la Démission' to 'le mythe messianique et impérialiste d'un Salut universel' (p. 9), a movement he observes going through the *Rougon-Macquart* novels and into the novels after the *Rougon-Macquart*. Borie sees this movement as the progress from the regressive and the pessimistic to the messianic, or from the material to the spiritual. In its entirety, Borie sees Zola's work as a succession of 'plusieurs mythes synchrétiques' (p. 9), which aim to unify underlying tensions in a contemporary French society which he claims has inherited the attitude of bourgeois Victorians in distinguishing between the passions (love) and the instincts (sexuality) (p. 7).

Borie's critical position is influenced by Freud, and he believes that Brunetière's charge that Zola enjoyed being 'dans l'ordure' takes on psychoanalytical implications in light of the appearance of Freud's theory on the anal character and its relation to avarice and anality, gold, and excrement. Additionally, Borie borrows Norman Brown's concept of 'la vision excrémentielle', which the latter used to describe an author whose Protestant mind had intuited the presence of a diabolic anality in the world since discovering the presence of 'une diffusion universelle de l'excrément', which reveals the domination of death in life. This 'excremental vision' is an expression of the Death Instinct, and, as Borie points out, is what Gilles Deleuze calls *la fêlure* in Zola (p. 27). However, for Borie, this 'malédiction excrémentielle' cannot 'logiquement' be undone by religion because God is literally not of this world (pp. 29–30). Borie believes that Zola subscribed to a naive medical utopia whereby salvation is conceived in the form of bodily health (p. 10). This then leads Borie to state that Zola's profession of faith in life at the end of and after the *Rougon-Macquart* series is no more than 'une *dénégation* massive'; it is only the signs that have changed, so instead of flowing excrement, it is flowing mother's milk and life itself (p. 74). Therefore, for Borie, the flow of death has been replaced by the flow of life at the end of the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle. Borie notes that there is no 'guérison', since the act of denial and what it denies forms an inseparable couple, so we witness, instead, a compromise rather than a cure during and after the twentieth novel *Le Docteur Pascal* (p. 75). Borie takes issue with Zola's apparent denial of the Death Instinct, whether that be Freud's theory or variations of it,

20 Jean Borie, *Zola et les mythes, ou de la nausée au salut* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971).

but I argue that Zola gives it a central presence in his novels. My thesis conceives of the Death Instinct as the *fêlure*, which is Zola's own term, and this phenomenon runs through the entire *Rougon-Macquart* series. It is a naturalistic phenomenon which bleeds away from the Rougon-Macquart family bloodline in the final volume, so, for Zola, the body which does not have this deathly seam within it may legitimately be deemed 'cured'. In that regard, Zola's concept of salvation as a bodily health is not a medical utopia, as Borie states, but physiological fact.

As well as the syncretic myths that Borie sees in Zola's novels, there is also the concept of Zola's 'anthropologie mythique' (p. 12), which is based on heredity and forms the story of an individual and of the human race. Borie compares this 'mythical anthropology' to Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, where the father is murdered by the sons in order to gain access to the females in the tribe. Borie maintains that Zola's original scene rests on a similar Fall or original sin, from which there is a fatal transmission through the generations of an organic lesion, heredity or *fêlure* (p. 43). This original violence is embodied by the eternal return of the *bête humaine*, a monster hidden under the veneer of civilisation, and which Borie believes to be close to the concept of the unconscious or the repressed (p. 69). Just as Borie recognises Zola's general movement from the material to the spiritual in the *Rougon-Macquart*, this thesis discusses Zola's treatment of both the material and the spiritual in his establishing of the *fêlure*. It will be considered as both illness and natural evil in the chapter on women (chapter 3), and also in the chapter on religion (chapter 4) where the *fêlure* is more recognisably a form of original sin. Christianity's original sin and Zola's *fêlure* may both be seen as forms of natural evil embedded in the body. However, this thesis argues that the Christian definition of original sin differs from Zola's definition of the *fêlure* because the latter is naturalised into a physiological illness, rather than being symbolised as a religious natural evil. Therefore, for Zola, there is some hope that such an illness can be cured, so Borie's statement that Zola's faith in life is a massive denial cannot be fully endorsed because Zola's tackling of the spiritual is transformed into material terms. Borie's Freudian-influenced mythical origins of violence and betrayal are outside of lived human history, and this thesis situates Zola's original scene of violence in Napoleon III's *coup d'état* of 1851 and his Second Empire regime. It is from this political original violence that the *fêlure* is able to thrive. The *fêlure* in various guises will be discussed in all the chapters, and the chapter on religion (chapter 4) will witness its end. The chapter on degeneration (chapter 1) will discuss the singular political context and nature of the

Second Empire in which the *fêlure* is able to develop.

Rachel Bowlby, in her study of the novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883), also uses Freudian theory coupled with Greek mythology in her description of the women customers in Octave Mouret's Parisian department store. Her argument is that commodities are promoted as images. It is Mouret's deliberate tactic to tempt his female customers to spend, and the susceptibility of the women is explained by Bowlby as a result of their being stuck in the 'narcissism of childhood', according to Freud's theory. She explains that, in psychoanalytic terms, the narcissistic stage is chronologically and structurally prior to the socialisation of the child whose transition into the rules of social convention limits the child's omnipotence. The impetus for this development is provided by the threat of castration. While boys can eventually respond to this by internalising an active, moral identity modelled on their father's, girls must come to terms with the fact that they are already castrated, lacking the male organ and what it represents. If they do not, they are engaged in a futile attempt to take on the functions of a masculine subjectivity which is not their own, and this explains why women tend to stay closer to the narcissism of childhood.²¹ Bowlby proposes that Freud, writing during the early stages of the consumer period of capitalism, found in the Narcissus myth an apt evocation of one of the constitutive stages in the formation of human subjectivity, figuring the ego in its initial attachment and identification with an ideal and all-fulfilling image, both separate from, and an extension of itself (*Looking*, p. 30). Thus, when the female customers are in the department store, looking at the commodity-images, Bowlby describes them in Greek mythological terms as 'Narcissus [...] fatally caught inside a trap of attraction' (*Looking*, p. 30). This escalates into women and commodities flaunting their images at one another 'in an amorous regard', and the shop window transforms into a narcissistic mirror (*Looking*, p. 32). Bowlby describes the women's 'colonisation of the mind', designed to produce new areas of need and desire (*Looking*, p. 70). In her description of Boucicaut's decision to rearrange all the departments just before the grand opening of the new Bon Marché buildings in 1872 (the emporium on which Zola based his novel), Bowlby describes this as a calculated effort to make the women lose their reason and go mad (*Looking*, p. 75). This thesis argues that Bowlby's characterisation of the female shoppers as female Narcissi, enslaved by their gaze upon the commodities, is countered by Denise's transfiguration into the Greek mythical

21 Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 29.

Medusa in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, who is able to offer protection from the evil eye. Bowlby describes the women shoppers' colonisation of mind, but, in the chapter on women (chapter 3), this thesis will discuss their consumerist desire as being an illness of the flesh and, particular to their gender, a manifestation of hysteria which was a contemporary myth.²² The desire of the women to shop, expressed as physical illness, is part of the degeneracy caused by Mouret's own desire for moneymaking, which is a bourgeois impulse.

iii) Demonic, ironic, and contemporary myths on women

Chantal Bertrand Jennings, in writing about the novel *Nana* in relation to myth, uses feminist criticism to show how the prostitute is depicted as a creature of evil. She points out its 'contenu fantasmatique' and believes 'le roman atteint [...] à l'exemplarité du mythe'.²³ This mythical status is due to 'la somme des projections fantasmatiques masculines' which metamorphose the courtesan into 'une idole sacrée' (Jennings, p. 48). The male gaze endows Nana with 'pouvoirs maléfiques', highlighting her human perversities such as narcissism, lesbianism, bestiality, sadism and necrophilia (Jennings, p. 50). Jennings writes that the mythical Nana has her womanly materiality defined in animal terms as her 'malpropreté' (Jennings, p. 49), which is made apparent through metonymic images of her intimate parts. Henri Mitterand has called *Nana* a 'poème des désirs du mâle', but Jennings adds that it is also 'celui du mal' (Jennings, p. 52). This thesis will discuss Nana in the chapter on the city (chapter 2), where she is seen as a creature of evil, perhaps the Devil himself. However, this status is not a mere masculine fantasy, as Jennings has described Nana, because the Haussmannian city has relegated her, as a prostitute, to the metaphorical underground which is assimilated to the space of the sewers. The Haussmannian Paris has a new social and topographical dynamic comprising both the overground and the underground, where the bourgeoisie inhabits the respectable overground and the poor are relegated to the underground. This is overlaid by the vertical cosmos of Christianity, so the underground is also the space of the demonic, making Nana an actual creature of evil.

Jonathan F. Krell, also writing on *Nana*, sees the prostitute as a mythical figure in

22 The myth of hysteria was a discourse of illness in the late nineteenth century, mainly attributed to women.

23 Chantal Bertrand Jennings, 'Lecture idéologique de *Nana*', *Mosaic*, 10 (1977), 47–54 (p. 48).

the ‘ironic mode’,²⁴ as defined by Northrop Frye in his study of the mythical and the naturalistic. Krell describes Nana as more demonised than deified, and notes that, by characterising her as a sex-crazed beast or filthy insect, Zola is perpetuating contemporary ‘myths’ on hysteria and prostitution, reinforcing the very prejudices he wants to overturn (Krell, p. 69). Krell notes Frye’s definition of myth in the ironic mode as being ‘myths [which] are displaced, losing their primary (real) significance, and assuming a metaphorical (unreal) meaning’ (Krell, p. 67). By describing Nana as a mythical figure in the ironic mode, Krell is in danger of underestimating the seriousness of what it means for Nana to be one of Haussmann’s underground beings, or the Devil himself. Nana is an *actual* creature of evil in the Haussmannian city, and making her a demonic figure in the ironic mode diminishes what it means to be regarded as a figure of evil by bourgeois society. Zola’s characterisation of Nana as a beast or an insect is possible within the parameters of degeneration. This state of decline is a force which is perceived to be powerful enough to reverse the human into a state of physical regression, moving backwards down the evolutionary chain. The Second Empire’s overground–underground dichotomy sets apart those belonging to the underground, where these citizens are dehumanised.

iv) Christian myth

Many critics have written on Zola’s novel *La Faute de l’abbé Mouret* (1875), which models itself on the Christian myth of the Garden of Eden and the figures of Adam and Eve. This is the mythical provenance of Christianity’s original sin. One critic, Richard B. Grant, believes that the ‘faute’, for Zola, was clearly nothing but a convention that he uses in discussing the development of the story.²⁵ Instead, by not integrating the symbolism properly, the real ‘faute’ was Zola’s arbitrary selection of the Biblical story (Grant, p. 288). While it is clear that Zola was inspired by this Christian myth in *La Faute*, I will argue that he goes far beyond using it as pure symbolism: it is the state of natural evil that original sin represents which Zola seizes upon. This idea will be discussed in the chapter on religion (chapter 4), where the disappearance of Mouret’s original sin through his ‘forgetting’ of this Christian myth results in the physical

24 Jonathan F. Krell, ‘Nana: Still Life, *Nature morte*’, *French Forum*, 19 (1994), 65–79 (p. 66).

25 Richard B. Grant, ‘Confusion of Meaning in Zola’s *La Faute de l’abbé Mouret*’, *Symposium*, 13 (1959), 284–89 (p. 287).

development of his body to a point of Naturalist perfection. This movement through *La Faute* charts the renunciation of the Christian belief that the human body is tainted by original sin. The body is transformed into a vessel of radiant health in Zola's novel. Rather than arbitrarily using the biblical story, it is, rather, a point of departure for Zola in establishing a comparison between the archetypal evil of original sin with the Rougon-Macquart *fêlure*. The Christian myth of natural evil and Zola's secular myth are identified as the same Naturalist corruption of the body, and this amalgam is naturalised as illness. It is in the novel *Le Docteur Pascal*, discussed in the same chapter, where the *fêlure* is 'cured'.

Valerie Minogue, also writing on *La Faute*, but in opposition to the viewpoint of Richard B. Grant, argues that Zola's use of the biblical story is a serious attempt to engage with the Christian myth. For Minogue, Zola is taking God's retribution in the Garden of Eden and positioning it within the human world, so that the legacy of condemnation and shame that Eve had experienced now becomes, for the Eve figure Albine in Zola's novel, an emanation from the past because it is part of a 'guilt-laden tribal knowledge'.²⁶ The Fall lies in the past of the world, and it is that past that corrupts (Minogue, p. 226). In equating Nature with Evil, Minogue writes that Zola seems to have transformed Christian beliefs into a new mythology which is just as firmly rooted in the notions of good and evil, Heaven and hell (Minogue, p. 219). However, his new mythology is based on an effort towards new knowledge and a new consciousness which echoes the patterns of the old (Minogue, p. 227). Minogue's focus is on the legacy of original sin which has passed through generations of humanity. This inheritance is an intellectual one, which promotes the concept of a human race as blighted by moral and natural evil. While Minogue moves original sin away from its mythical Christian scene and offers a worldly context, my focus is on the questioning of this biblical original sin as myth. The nature of evil embodied within original sin is transposed into Zola's secular *fêlure*. As this is transformed into an illness which is cured in *Le Docteur Pascal*, Zola is able to offer a 'solution' to the seemingly eternal conundrum of original sin. The evil nature of the human condition as shown by bodily evidence of natural evil, as Christianity represents it, is thus to be questioned. For Zola, evil is a real presence in Napoleon III's Second Empire and is not merely an intellectual concept emanating from a mythical past. Evil is a political and material corruption

26 Valerie Minogue, 'Zola's Mythology: That Forbidden Tree', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 14 (1978), 217–30 (p. 224).

which is ever-present in the degeneracy of the social body.

Philip Walker, writing on *La Faute*, sees Zola's use of myth as an expression of cultural regeneration.²⁷ Walker sees the novel's basic ironic device in the reversing of the roles of Adam and Eve (*P*, p. 445), so that Serge and Albine, the Naturalist Adam and Eve, move from a sinful state to a sinless state. He notes that Zola was in revolt against traditional conceptions of good and evil, but did not succeed in ridding himself of the idea of evil itself. Redemption was to be attained through the individual's affirmation of his natural goodness and renunciation of his supposed uniqueness from the rest of the living cosmos (*P*, p. 446). Walker sees *La Faute* as a paean to nature (*P*, p. 447).

Although Walker believed that Zola was haunted by the apocalyptic myth of the Great Final Conflict,²⁸ the Christian myth of the battle against the Antichrist before the Second Coming of Christ, he maintains that it is not Christianity that is Zola's preoccupation, but pantheism. This is a belief that the world is a single whole of closely interrelated parts, with nothing beyond it, and this whole should be regarded as divine and a proper object of worship, or it could be assumed that it contains some divine indwelling principle (*G*, p. 27). For Walker, Zola's 'cult of life' was one of many cults (*G*, p. 35).

The pantheism that Walker believes to be a part of Zola's work is a doctrine that identifies God with the universe. Although Zola's ultimate belief in life is one of the main arguments of my thesis, this is not a life that is sanctioned by God. Zola depicts life in *La Faute* and *Le Docteur Pascal* as an entirely naturalistic phenomenon, a physiological process within which there can be no concept of evil attached. The myth of natural evil, or Christianity's original sin, can only be a bodily illness for Zola. However, the concepts of good and evil defined by Christianity still remain relevant as they are valid moral references. Although evil as original sin may no longer be a universal belief in the age of Naturalism, the concept of evil is regarded by Zola as pertinent and valid in representing the modernity of the Second Empire regime. Zola's focus on the body in *La Faute* allows him to widen the scope of natural evil to the *fêlure*, a secular original sin specific to the Second Empire. Walker's references to Zola's cult of life, to *La Faute* being a paean to nature, and to pantheism point more

27 Philip Walker, 'Prophetic Myths in Zola', *PMLA*, 74 (1959), 444–52 (p. 444). Further references to this article will occur in the text, preceded by 'P'.

28 Philip Walker, *'Germinal' and Zola's Philosophical and Religious Thought* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1984), p. 65. Further references to this article will occur in the text, preceded by 'G'.

broadly to Zola's ultimate optimism in the material world and in humanism, which this thesis will illustrate in describing the establishing, proliferation and final dissipation of the *fêlure*. Zola's optimism is brought into sharp relief when set against his use of degeneration in combination with the *fêlure*, as it is the triumphing of life against death in the humanist and Naturalist context. I would concur with Walker when he writes that Zola's use of myth is an expression of cultural regeneration: Zola uses both the myth of the biblical story and that of degeneration as a springboard for creating his own myth of life. Walker considers how redemption may be attained through a belief in pantheism, but Zola's notion of what constitutes redemption is slightly different. As the thesis will demonstrate, Zola takes the Christian concept of redemption — the saving from sinfulness — and reformulates it as a naturalistic phenomenon. This means that, for Zola, sin, or natural evil, may be rendered as an illness which can be 'cured'. In his use of the *fêlure*, Zola incorporates the Christian dichotomy between sinfulness and redemption, so the depletion and 'curing' of Zola's *fêlure* may then be regarded as a secular form of redemption.

The question of Zola's engagement with the religious is further discussed by Sophie Guermès. She writes that Zola's presentation of heredity as a scientific adaptation of the dogma of original sin constitutes the modernity of the project, 'une laïcisation de la notion fondatrice du christianisme'.²⁹ In fact, she proposes that Zola is demonstrating 'un bilan critique' (Guermès, p. 11) of Christianity in some of the *Rougon-Macquart* novels and in *Les Trois Villes* cycle. Zola's judgment, according to Guermès, is that men must become masters of their destiny after eighteen centuries of illusions and injustice perpetrated by Christianity. She adds that 'le bonheur n'est pas un état durable, sauf dans les rêves de quelques utopistes' (Guermès, p. 11). The state of 'le bonheur' is a state of perfection in Christian terms, a state where sin is no longer present. In affirming that this state cannot really be a reality, Guermès represents this notion as wholly Christian because perfection cannot be possible within the human life, or until life after death. This thesis goes beyond 'le bonheur' as a general moral concept. I will treat original sin as both moral and natural evil, so the latter stands as punishment for the former. As the Augustinian theory of retribution proposes, it is the immoral act which generates the natural evil. For the Naturalist Zola, this is transfigured into a material seam of malady, or the secular evil of the *fêlure*. Guermès interprets evil as

²⁹ Sophie Guermès, *La Religion de Zola: naturalisme et déchristianisation* (Paris: Éditions Champion, 2003), p. 10.

generally immoral behaviour or vice. For example, *la faute*, which leads the Second Empire regime to ruin, is described as the forgetting of ‘quelques valeurs essentielles’, and the degenerescence of the period is caused by materialism (Guermès, p. 157). Similarly, she writes that the Rougon-Macquart family are ill ‘car ils ne tendent pas vers le bien; ils incarnent la dévaluation des valeurs’ (Guermès, p. 157). This thesis will examine more deeply the actual nature of evil in Zola’s use of the *fêlure* and the nineteenth-century myth of degeneration. Both will be presented as forms of natural evil which result from the political corruption of the Second Empire. Guermès believes that Zola had to suppress his early spiritual preoccupation on a personal level in writing *Les Rougon-Macquart*, and which only re-surfaced in the following two novel-cycles (Guermès, p. 20). I will counter that it is important not to underestimate the extent of the religious and its value in Zola’s engagement with his myth of the *fêlure*, which has considerable moral significance.

v) Napoleonic myth

The critics discussed so far have concentrated on variations of classical, archetypal, religious, and Freudian myth that they see in Zola’s novels, and all these different mythologies are of great importance in considering Zola’s work. However, because this thesis will examine the corrosive nature of Napoleon III’s reign and its effect on the body, it is necessary to try to understand the Second Empire itself. It is essential to see how an historical period and its political and economic protagonists have either consciously or unconsciously shaped the era to suit their hold on power. Their inherent immorality in doing so, as Zola saw it, constitutes a modern mythology of bourgeois progress.

Zola portrays the historical situation of the Second Empire (1852–1870) as overwhelmingly defined by politics and economics, under the reign of Napoleon III. In his study of the economic and political dynamics of the period, David F. Bell believes the *Rougon-Macquart* represents a debunking of the Napoleonic myth,³⁰ and it particularly surrounds the question of the legitimacy of the emperor’s role in the *Rougon-Macquart* (Bell, p. x). The cult of Napoleon I appealed to the generation of

30 David F. Bell, *Models of Power: Politics and Economics in Zola’s ‘Rougon-Macquart’* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), p. 1.

1830 who admired this young, dynamic, self-made man. In his discussion of the fourth chapter of the novel *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*, Bell describes the appearance of Napoleon III in a procession through Paris to Notre Dame on the occasion of the baptism of his newborn son (Bell, p. 2). In Notre Dame, he shows the imperial prince to the people by holding him high in his two upraised arms; previously in Notre Dame, Napoleon I had raised his hands above his head to display a crown. The spectators are thus witnessing a reaffirmation of a dynasty. Bell reminds the reader that Napoleon III is skirting the issue of his self-proclamation as emperor in the founding of the Second Empire, and instead claims his right to the throne by inserting himself into a lineage that reaches beyond him. Bell asks if Napoleon III is a *true* pretender, an inheritor of the legacy of his illustrious uncle, or a *false* pretender, a simulacrum of the Napoleonic myth (Bell, pp. 4, 5). The self-crowning is a denial of origin, of foundation, a symbolic denial of the father and therefore of genealogy. By interrupting the line of kings, Bell notes, he subverts the model but at the same time institutes himself as a model. Bell considers the Platonic doctrine which deals with the problem of the relationship between an original model (an idea) and its copies: the good or correct one and the simulacrum (Bell, p. 6). It is into a harmonious system that the simulacrum introduces a perversion as it attempts to assume the position of a model (Bell, p. 7).

In chapters 1 and 2, on degeneration and the city, the thesis will discuss the self-mythologisation of Napoleon III's regime. There is a close link between the body and the Second Empire climate made corrupt by power and money. It is an immoral regime which brings into existence the *fêlure*, a kind of natural evil that invades the bodies of the Rougon-Macquart family living under the administration. There has been little critical attention in recognising myth that is generated by Napoleon III's reign in the Second Empire. It is a corrupt regime, and its biologically hazardous effect on the body mirrors its immorality. The *fêlure* is a moral comment on the regime because it is a Naturalistic definition of evil. In addition, the contemporary myth of degeneration provides a synchronous, and perhaps intensifying, effect on the political degeneration of the Second Empire regime, emanating from Napoleon III's body. The myth of degeneration is a dynamic concept, which allows for metaphorical and physiological decline, on both a micro and a macro level, from the individual human to the national level. The sickness that is produced by the *fêlure* and by degeneration provides a Naturalistic way to examine exactly what the nature of immorality in the Second Empire is. The magnitude of it is so extreme that immorality becomes synonymous not

so much with the poor behaviour of individuals as a force of evil that has a materiality of its own. It is the universal dispersion of this evil, from the corporeal to the environmental, that gives the immorality such fundamental force that it is lifted to the level of mythology. The thesis will see a progression from death to life within Zola's Naturalist credo.

Proposed analysis of myth in Zola's novels: the Second Empire, the *fêlure*, degeneration

Having given a critical overview of different types of myth that have been applied to Zola's novels, it is now necessary to examine in more detail how this thesis will address the self-mythologisation of the Second Empire regime, the *fêlure*, and degeneration. The thesis will be divided into four chapters: on degeneration, the city, women, and religion. The critics who will be deployed will discuss the deathly nature of the Second Empire regime in Naturalistic terms: the body will suffer the presence of natural evil, and this is set within a political and social environment that is degraded by degeneration. The natural evil will be discussed as both a secular and a Christian concept: Gilles Deleuze considers this as Zola's secular *fêlure*, while Paul Ricœur views it as a 'fault-line', describing it as Christianity's original sin. Elias Canetti writes of the beliefs of traditional tribes, who regard the body as capable of carrying evil as illness. I propose that there is a binary nature to Zola's depiction of natural evil. Not only is this a secular version of original sin, but it should also be thought of as illness. Zola's Naturalist credo does not allow for what could be termed as the 'supernatural' to remain unexplained, so the 'curing' of original sin in *Le Docteur Pascal* represents a triumph of Naturalism over Christianity. Max Nordau's degeneration theory provides a conceptual model that sheds light on how the *fêlure* is able to proliferate during the Second Empire. Degeneration envisages the moral and cultural decline of Europe, and it is a decline that is expressed as illness. The moral decline is that of the bourgeoisie in Zola's novels. In their relentless pursuit of wealth and hedonism, morality has been abandoned. The degeneration that takes hold is a physiological disorder from the political body of Napoleon III himself, spreading like an infection to the rest of Second Empire society. This physical corruption is encapsulated in the *fêlure*. This corruption also forms part of the topographical fabric of Paris, the centre of degeneration.

As well as being a physiological evil, the *fêlure* is also a space of evil in the Haussmannian city. David Pike's theory of the underground and the overground conveys the concept of the segregation between the bourgeoisie and the lower classes living in the Haussmannian city. The 'underground' is the metaphorical and physical space where the lower classes have been relegated by the bourgeoisie. This underground is also a space which is equivalent to the Christian hell, according to Pike. I propose that it is also the physical space of the *fêlure*, the material seam of evil running through the city of Paris. The theories of Walter Benjamin and Mircea Eliade provide a means to counter the bourgeois ideology which has created the underground–overground duality. The Haussmannian city is overwhelmingly a place of high commerce, where the poor have been pushed toward the city's peripheries. The city's outskirts represent the underground, and the poor are literally out of sight from central Paris. Benjamin highlights the visibility of the poor in this extreme Second Empire modernity, while Eliade's writing on traditional tribes underlines the sinful nature of forgetting in the collective memory, which the Second Empire is attempting to engineer in its erasure of the non-bourgeois classes. In regard to the nature of the commercial city, Jesse Goldhammer's theory on the link between blood sacrifice and the establishing of authority identifies the ultra-violence of the Haussmannian city. This physical violence is perpetrated on the city itself and on the unsuspecting women shoppers in Octave Mouret's luxurious department store in *Au Bonheur des Dames*. In chapter 4, on religion, the thesis will close on a note of optimism when the evil which has blighted the entire Second Empire seems to have been 'cured', when the *fêlure* is eliminated through natural means. If this is the case, then France and its citizens — the collective French body — will finally be free of corruption.

i) Summary of chapter 1 — Degeneration

This chapter will focus on the novel *La Débâcle*, which recounts the disastrous Franco-Prussian War for the French under Napoleon III. The French army is shown to be disorganised in contrast to the supremely efficient Prussians, who win the war against an inferior enemy. However, Zola depicts this battle in moral terms. The morally ascendant Prussians believe that they are fighting a degenerate France, and this degeneration is in turn represented as sinful in Christian terms. The novel shows the

French army commanders as corrupt, but Zola widens this notion of corruption to encompass evil. It is within the figure of Napoleon III himself that Zola is able to synthesise the motifs of the body, society, and morality, which coalesce through the entire thesis. The emperor appears a few times in *La Débâcle*, and each time he is visibly ailing. This, of course, is rooted in the historical reality of his dysentery. He steps onto the battlefield, but this commander-in-chief cannot possibly lead his army to triumph. Zola portrays him as the figurehead for France's degenerative state, but this is not only a metaphorical condition. Napoleon III represents political degeneration, but his physiological degeneration is equally important.

In this chapter, I will use the degeneration theory of Max Nordau to support my argument that Zola's portrayal of evil in the Second Empire has a material presence, and is not merely a figurative evil. Zola's motif of the *fêlure* is the natural evil which traverses the bodies and environment of the Second Empire, but this is not able to exist without the wider conditions that degeneration provides. Nordau's theory links the body, society, and morality. In essence, humankind must use its reason to continue the march of progress and to maintain order in society. For this reason, he criticises Decadent artists for using symbolism and mysticism in their works, and he names Zola as one of these Decadents. For Nordau, these artists are threatening evolutionary progress, and are thus threatening society itself. When progress is no longer advancing, according to Nordau, there is a lack of vital energy which then leads to degeneration. Nordau envisions this degenerative state as a pathological phenomenon: it is figured as a disease. Nordau accuses Zola himself of having a disordered nervous system, which accounts for his supposedly Decadent works.

It is in the figure of Napoleon III in *La Débâcle* that the body represents degeneration and illness, and for most of the novel he is experiencing pain. We find out that he is suffering from dysentery, which is an infection of the intestines. I will consider this infection to be also a moral contagion. This degenerative ailment spreads to the rest of French society from the emperor's political body, but particularly to the bourgeoisie. The sickness is dispersed as if by infection, a physiological and moral disease. Napoleon III's attempts to sustain the Napoleonic myth of his uncle for his own political ends also represents a degenerative corruption which damages France.

To emphasise this degenerative condition as a moral sickness, I shall be using the theory of Elias Canetti. The sickness is a moral designation of the political health of the Second Empire, and this is what Zola's *fêlure* represents. This motif stands for

immorality and corruption, both of which are materialised as a seam of natural evil in the body. Through Canetti, the *fêlure* can be seen as both a physical illness and a mythical sign of malice, combining the naturalistic and immoral features of degeneration. Canetti writes that traditional tribes interpret illness as a grudge from the dead, and this has an element of malediction. To translate this to the Second Empire, the accursed nature of degeneration means the terminal ruin of France.

The *fêlure* is a sign of death, which is an inherent characteristic of degeneration. Moreover, it is a sign of death within life because it is part of the living human body. This replicates Christianity's original sin or natural evil, which is the religious belief that an act of moral evil results in the suffering of natural evil. The deathliness of degeneration fuses with the deathliness of natural evil in the final part of *La Débâcle*, when Paris is set on fire by the Commune. The bloodletting and flames are a purifying force which will simultaneously expiate France's sins and act as a 'cure' for its degeneration.

ii) Summary of chapter 2 — The City

This chapter will focus on the expression of the Second Empire's immorality in the topography of Haussmannian Paris. The novels *Nana* and *L'Assommoir* (1877) illustrate the two Zolian mythologies which will be discussed. The first considers the *fêlure* as a physical space in the city, and the second is the bourgeois myth of eternal progress. It is as a result of the seemingly unending advancement of capitalism, a bourgeois ideology, that the *fêlure* is able to exist in the city. In the same way that the *fêlure* is the deathly seam of natural evil in the body, its materialisation in the city also represents death and evil.

Haussmann's rebuilding of Paris in the 1850s and 1860s turned the city into a bourgeois network where moneymaking was the prime concern. In this restructuring, the poor and dispossessed were dispersed away from the centre and pushed to the outer margins of the city. In my discussion of *Nana*, I will be using David Pike's urban category of the underworld being, which comprises the underclasses. His concept of the underground and the overground will serve as a reflection of the social paradigm of Haussmannian Paris, which originates from the bourgeoisie. The overground is a bourgeois space, while the underground contains everything and everyone that is

unacceptable to the bourgeoisie. These spaces are both literal and metaphorical. Aligned with this is Pike's use of Christian symbolism which fuses with the spatial, so that good was above and evil was below. Therefore, Nana the prostitute, a figure of the *bas-fonds*, also becomes a figure of evil.

The space of the underground is a space of evil according to Pike, but I propose that it is also the space of Zola's *fêlure*. Gilles Deleuze describes the *fêlure* as having shape-shifting properties as it travels forward. I consider that it extends downwards from the city's topographical fault line that runs between the interface of the overground and the underground, and it fills the entire underground space. As the *fêlure* is natural evil, this means that Nana's underground is an authentic space of evil, and Nana herself becomes a satanic figure. The *fêlure* is, then, a spatial, metaphysical, and mythological motif. It is the seam of evil that runs through the fabric of Haussmannian Paris.

This chapter will also argue that the bourgeois myth of eternal progress is predicated on the elimination of the past in order for the eternal present to exist. The poor and dispossessed represent the 'primitive' past, and they constitute a direct challenge to bourgeois modernity. I will be using Walter Benjamin's theory on the interplay between capitalism, modernity, and politics because he acknowledges that these factors have created their own mythology by the deliberate repression of the past. He writes that capitalism and modernity have exerted a soporific effect over Europe, so there needs to be an historical awakening, which is, at the same time, an awakening to myth. Essentially, Benjamin believes that the idea of the new is not sustainable as the past always materialises into the present through the concept of the phantasmagoria. This casts into doubt the feasibility of the Second Empire's efforts to create a state of eternal progress.

Gervaise in *L'Assommoir* is one of the victims of the Second Empire's myth of eternal progress. She belongs to the working class, so her place is within the underground of Haussmann's new Parisian topography. From the start of the novel, her life is lived within a contained space, and as she becomes destitute, the space in which she can live her life becomes markedly smaller. At the end of the novel, as Gervaise wanders through modern Paris, she is a figure of alienation who does not belong to the bourgeois overground. Gervaise is an exile in her own city. The work of Mircea Eliade may help illuminate Gervaise's predicament. He writes on the beliefs of traditional tribes, who believe that the 'forgetting' of the collective memory constituted by tradition is a sin or disaster. He notes that the tribes need to know the myths to learn the secret of

the origin of things. Being part of the past which the Second Empire is trying to forget, the tragedy of *L'Assommoir* is that Gervaise had no consciousness of the mechanism of her repression.

iii) Summary of chapter 3 — Women

From a consideration of the deliberate suppression of the non-bourgeois in the Haussmannian city, I shall then examine how the Second Empire's myth of eternal progress affects bourgeois women, that is, those belonging to the overground. In this environment of extreme capitalism, women especially are subjected to the brutal powers of capital. These forces are not metaphorical, but are naturalised by Zola to become tangible forces. As in the case of the *fêlure*, these naturalistic forces become identified with evil. I will discuss how these capitalist forces are depicted in the novels *La Curée* and *Au Bonheur des Dames*, drawing a link between capitalism and the physical violence that is perpetrated on the minds and bodies of women.

The Second Empire's need to establish itself as a political authority is paramount if it is to perpetuate its myth of eternal progress. It is not simply a case of administrative capability that will secure its position, but, rather, a reach into myth is necessary. To illustrate the mythical underpinning of the Second Empire project, I will be using the theory of Jesse Goldhammer who makes a connection between politics, blood sacrifice, and the sacred. In modern times, in order for a secular political power to legitimate its authority, it needs to invoke the sacred. Sacrifice confers sacredness, but this also requires violence. It is this aspect of Goldhammer's theory that may be applied to Zola's portrayal of the violence that is perpetrated on bourgeois women in modern Paris.

The violence inherent within sacrifice is also present in *La Curée*. This applies equally in the bloody slaughter of the old Paris and the mental and physical destruction of the character Renée, wife of the speculator Saccard. The very title of the novel indicates the violent killing of an animal. This analogy is played out in the scene where Saccard's hand, blade-like, acts out the cutting-up of old Paris, hacking the city to pieces as if it were an animal. The novel presents a clear link between capitalism and sacrifice, most notably in Saccard's wish to 'égorger les gens' in his business dealings. This means either to 'cut the throat of' or 'to bleed dry', and both meanings are appropriate in the novel.

Renée is a commodity, and she is described as a *sacrifice* to her husband Saccard. Again, this has a double meaning: either a loss in the conventional sense, or ‘to give away merchandise for a knockdown price’. This appropriation of the bourgeois woman into the capitalist matrix brings on mental and bodily sickness in Renée, which is a degenerative sickness. This malady moves from physiological illness to a state of naturalist evil, and then becomes Christian evil. Renée’s bourgeois decadence leads to an affair with her stepson Maxime, but Zola clearly designates this as a Christian sin in his allusion to the Garden of Eden and direct reference to original sin. Sickness and evil become interchangeable, so Renée’s sighting of her ‘mental crack’ in the mirror is the inevitable sign of her degeneration and of the violence done to her by Second Empire capitalism.

This quiet sacrifice of Renée becomes a bloody massacre of the women shoppers in *Au Bonheur des Dames*. They experience such violence in their shopping frenzy that they become sacrificial bodies in Octave Mouret’s department store. The novel’s images of women mannequins with price labels for heads, effectively decapitated women, and of fragmented women’s bodies testify to the destructive nature of capitalism. As with Renée, the shoppers suffer cognitive disorder, their mental estrangement being a symptom of the contemporary myth of hysteria. However, Zola brings this back to a matter of evil as Mouret wishes to exploit the fever of the shoppers, which he calls ‘le beau malheur’. It is Denise Baudu who is able to offer redemption to the shoppers. Her Medusa-like gaze, traditionally a protection against the evil eye, neutralises the desiring gaze of the shoppers. For the women shoppers, they are consequently able to move from a state of *malheur* to one of *bonheur*.

iv) Summary of chapter 4 — Religion

This chapter moves away from the idea of the body as a source of evil, and instead argues that it becomes the means by which life is affirmed. The close parallel between the Rougon-Macquart family *fêlure* and Christianity’s original sin is fused into a single entity, and both natural evils are eradicated. The human body and its blood are now untainted by evil, which had not been the case in the novels discussed in the previous chapters. Nature is now once again life-giving, and not only endowing life, but also the means to redemption and eternal life. Zola’s humanism has usurped these functions

from Christianity.

The *fêlure* as a natural evil has been present for most of the *Rougon-Macquart*, and this chapter will discuss its very nature and the event of its eradication in the final volume. I shall be using the novels *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* and *Le Docteur Pascal* to consider Zola's analysis of what the *fêlure* is. There is a direct equivalent between original sin, illness, and the *fêlure*. It is Zola's Naturalism, however, which finally disperses this evil.

In *La Faute*, the young priest is indoctrinated with the Christian myth of original sin, so he is always anxious to avoid the corrupt material world. He contracts amnesia, which allows him to 'forget' his priestly vows of celibacy, so allowing him to enter a physical relationship with Albine with no guilt. They are the Naturalistic Adam and Eve in le Paradou, an ironic version of the Garden of Eden. The priest's transformation into his alter-ego Serge Mouret, the archetypal Naturalistic man, rids his body of original sin. Serge's innocence of Christian dogma, afforded to him by his amnesia, has rid him of the fear of committing moral evil.

I shall be using the theories of the Protestant philosopher Paul Ricœur, who writes on original sin. His work will be beneficial because he gives a definition of what original sin is. He describes it as the 'fault-line' in man which creates the possibility of moral evil. Zola preserves the nature of it as a seam of evil in the body within Mouret. This seam subsequently disappears in Mouret's transformation into Serge. Ricœur notes that if an individual no longer believes that God will punish him, that will break the cycle of evil. I will apply this notion to Mouret, who is able to break the cycle through his contracting amnesia.

The *fêlure's* simultaneously mythological and physiological aspects are acknowledged in Elias Canetti's account of the Australian Aranda medicine man's mythical new internal organs. These are given to him by the spirits, and this strengthened physiology is the counterpart of Serge's renewed body at the peak of his Naturalist perfection. Serge has thrown off the natural evil in the same way that the medicine man is able to ward off evil with the power which originates from his intestines.

In *Le Docteur Pascal*, the final volume of the *Rougon-Macquart*, Pascal is the Naturalistic counterpart to Christ who invents a new serum which seems to give new life to his patients. His ambition is to uncover the secret of heredity and eradicate natural evil in the form of suffering. Since he believes in life, he is convinced that new

blood in the human race will mean the eradication of evil. It is Naturalism that will confer eternal life, not Christianity, and Pascal's newborn son embodies a redemptive future for the family and for humankind. Tante Dide and Charles die (the latter by haemorrhaging), the first and last members of the Rougon-Macquart family, so the *fêlure*, originated from Tante Dide, may have seeped away in the flow of Charles's blood. Naturalism triumphs as 'life' is the last word of the novel, which is the final volume of the *Rougon-Macquart*. The force of life has reversed the force of death within degeneration. The corruption that has tainted the period of the Second Empire, and which has weaved its way through the twenty volumes, has finally been eliminated. With this eradication, Zola has demonstrated the moral purpose of myth in the *Rougon-Macquart*.

Chapter 1

Degeneration

This chapter will examine the nineteenth-century myth of degeneration as an illustration of the moral degeneracy of Napoleon III's reign. The links that degenerative theory makes between the human body, society, and morality is used by Zola to reveal the degenerate political body of the emperor in a naturalistic manner. As imperial political corruption is figured as a bodily concept, the resolution of this evil must necessarily be determined through the body. Redemption must, therefore, occur through a national bloodletting. Napoleon III's degraded imperial strength is also shown to be analogous to the degrading of the Napoleonic myth.

The discourse of degeneration was a theory which applied scientific thinking to the arts in late nineteenth-century Europe. The most prominent writer on this concept was the German physician and arts critic Max Nordau, who attacked the literary modernism of the Decadents as sick and perverted. According to him, the artistic production of the Decadents was 'proof' of the artist's sick mind and values. As a Naturalist writer, Zola was himself branded a degenerate by Nordau in *Entartung*, first published in German in 1892.

In his thesis on degeneration, Nordau wrote that *fin-de-siècle* artists shared the same 'somatic features' as degenerates, such as criminals, prostitutes and pronounced lunatics.³¹ This led to the 'pathological character' (Introduction, *Degeneration*, p. vi) of the works of artists, which were dangerous influences on society. Nordau's criticism of these artists was that they undermined the march of progress and order in society, which were vital for the evolution of man. In essence, Nordau saw his mission as a moral one in which he was trying to prevent the collapse of society. The discourse of degeneration was also more widely applied to the fall of France from its great national status after the disastrous Franco-Prussian War of 1870. This provided a way of explaining France's parlous state, and it was expressed as a medical metaphor. Nordau's theory explained France's situation as the consequence of degeneration. He describes the *fin-de-siècle* artists, including Zola, as precipitating the 'end of an established order' (Nordau, p. 5) in their pursuit of indisciplined art. It is this activity which is ushering in the 'reddened light of the Dusk of Nations' (Nordau, p. 6), which is the prelude to national collapse.

31 Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. v. Originally published in German in 1892, translated from the second edition of the German work *Entartung*.

Zola had been a case study for Édouard Toulouse for studying the connection between intelligence and neuropathology. Dr Toulouse was Director of the Laboratory for Experimental Psychology at the École des Hautes Études in Paris, and Zola writes that Toulouse believed that Nordau's methodological role model, Cesare Lombroso, did not practise good science. He also writes that Nordau's *Degeneration* was full of lies and foolishness, and he was particularly scathing about Nordau himself:

Il n'est pas d'imaginaires baroques publiées dans les journaux, d'interviews mal comprises et rédigées en patois, d'ineptes calomnies circulant dans les bas-fonds de l'envie et de la haine, qu'il n'ait recueillies, épinglées, classées avec le sérieux imperturbable d'un chiffonnier de lettres, bien résolu à salir son temps par cette exposition menteuse de loques inventées. On dit que M. Nordau vit depuis longtemps parmi nous. Alors, en vérité, que fait-il donc de ses yeux et de ses oreilles, pour parler de nous avec cette extraordinaire naïveté d'un Lapon qui n'aurait jamais quitté sa hutte de neige?³²

However, despite what Nordau thought of his work, Zola's mission has just as much to do with morality as Nordau's. Zola's novel *La Débâcle* engages with the general cultural discourse of degeneration in his portrayal of the dying French Second Empire, greatly at a disadvantage in its fight against a seemingly youthful Prussia in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. But it is particularly interesting, I propose, to set Max Nordau's conception of degeneration against Zola's novel. Nordau's original 1892 German edition was published in 1892, the same year as Zola's novel was published. In his novel, Zola responds to the same cultural anxieties which Nordau had set out in his degenerative theory on the close links between the body, society and morality. Zola transposes these concerns to his own project of depicting the Second Empire as a dying, degenerate social body, and France as a subsequently depleted nation. The novel uses the concept of the body as a starting point, and expands this to articulate new and related meanings for the human body, the national body and, finally, the sacrificial body. In this way, Zola is able to bring together the close link between the individual human, France as a nation, and the sacrificial relationship between the two. The body acts as a metaphor to show that one element inevitably affects another, so that the individual being part of a nation is as much a physiological bond as a racial or patriotic one. As the chapter will discuss, the sacrificial element is key as it brings in the notion of sinfulness. Through the metaphor of the body, Zola is able to depict this immorality as a Naturalistic phenomenon. The degeneration from which France seems to be suffering is,

³² Émile Zola, 'L'Enquête du Docteur Toulouse', *Le Journal* (24 November 1896), in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Mitterand, XII (1969), 708–13 (p. 711).

then, both a sickness and a sign of immorality in the novel. The pathological character of Nordau's degeneration, a moral definition, has been applied anew by Zola to show the Second Empire's corruption.

This chapter will begin with the huge impact of Nordau's theory of degeneration on European thought after the publication of *Entartung* in 1892. It will then consider how Zola's novel *La Débâcle* incorporates the same concerns of Nordau's vision of degeneration in its depiction of the opposing sides of the dying France and the rejuvenated Prussia in the Franco-Prussian War. Zola's focus is on the degeneracy of the Second Empire at its lowest ebb, a consequence of bourgeois decadence. This is portrayed as a sickness running from the body of Napoleon III to the rest of society: therefore the degeneration is both political and physiological. We shall see how Napoleon III's physical degeneration is due to his unhealthy desire to emulate the greatness of his uncle, Napoleon Bonaparte. This desire is part of the myth of Napoleon which casts a dark shadow on Napoleon III and France. There will be examination of the close link between the operational ineffectiveness of the French army — because of the impact of the emperor's physiological and political degeneration — and its development into a moral matter. The novel describes instances of missing vital equipment for the army, a lack or *faute*. Zola reformulates this *faute* so that it changes into a moral and physical sickness, which becomes a *faute* of national proportions. It is the aligning of this *faute* with religious redemption by Zola at the end of the novel which marks out the moral gravity of France's ill-fated declaration of war against Prussia. It is an act of hubris, which ultimately reveals the sinfulness of a corrupt political regime.

The chapter will then consider how the three central characters in the novel Maurice, Henriette, and Jean variously embody a tainted bourgeois decadence and a working class free of degenerative sickness. It will conclude with a discussion of the symbolism of Jean's killing of Maurice, the resilient peasant killing the decadent bourgeois. It is an accidental bloodletting, which is vital if the degenerative sickness is to leave the bourgeois body. The bloodletting of the Commune's *semaine sanglante* at the end of the novel is similarly a national need to expiate the sins of the nation after the end of the rule of the Second Empire.

i) What is degeneration?

To understand how Zola used the discourse of degeneration in *La Débâcle*, published in 1892, it is essential to consider the attitude to the theory in France in the 1880s and 1890s. Robert Nye writes of the turning point of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 which, for France, resulted in an altered geopolitical situation, the fall of *La Grande Nation* from great power status. The situation was worsened by rapidly falling birth rates and a host of social pathologies (criminality, prostitution, alcoholism, suicide, sexual perversion) which appeared to call into question both the quantity and quality of the French population.³³ There was a need to reassess France's image of itself as a great nation after its 1870 defeat by Prussia, and the image of the relative status of France and Germany (Nye, p. 138). The new nation, which already had a much larger population than France in 1870, also had a more substantial birth-rate and demonstrated an astonishing capacity for economic growth that allowed it to surpass France in most significant areas by the 1890s (Nye, pp. 138, 140). The French saw this model of crisis as medical in nature, and through it they perceived and labelled social deviance and, through the same model, they sought the means to cure it (Nye, p. xiii). In wider Europe, theories of degeneration were developed by clinicians and writers such as Lombroso, Nordau, and B. A. Morel. The pathologies weakening France were linked in a single degenerative syndrome. In the 1860s the French medical and scientific community debated the relative quality of the population, and it was in this context that the notion of degenerescence was first raised as a social question (Nye, p. 141). By the 1890s degeneracy was no longer simply a clinical theory of abnormal individual pathologies, but a *social* theory of persuasive force and power (Nye, p. 143).

Entartung was the first of three classic reviews of the concept of decadence, and Nordau's attack on the Decadents was the most translated and internationally the most influential. Between 1890 and 1900, *Entartung* was one of Europe's ten bestselling books, and Nordau's critique became de rigueur for both critics and defenders of literary modernism.³⁴ Nordau used the authority of science to help him deflate public esteem of the most well-known Decadents through 'scientific' analysis of their alleged preoccupation with disease, sexual deviancy and amorality. Decadents were branded

33 Robert A. Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. xii.

34 Hans-Peter Söder, 'Disease and Health as Contexts of Modernity: Max Nordau as a Critic of Fin-de-Siècle Modernism', *German Studies Review*, 14 (1991), 473–87 (p. 474).

dangerously asocial and even criminally deviant from middle-class morality (Söder, p. 475). Such was the acceptance of Nordau's medical model of cultural crisis that Zola himself, decried by Nordau and his own disciples as a Decadent, readily submitted to medical check-ups in order to produce scientific proof of his normality (Söder, p. 476). Zola was aware of Nordau's works through his colleague Auguste Dietrich, to whom he had written a letter on 13 July 1886 thanking Dietrich for sending Nordau's *Les Mensonges conventionnels de notre civilisation* which he had begun to read with keen interest.³⁵

Nordau believed that *fin-de-siècle* artists represented a 'contempt' (p. 5) for traditional views of custom and morality. Specifically, Zola's work was described as 'filth' (p. 13), and his Naturalism was denounced as 'false science' (p. 488). Nordau castigated Zola for bringing in the concept of 'milieu' into his novels to explain the shaping forces of society on the individual. Nordau believed that this concept should remain in the fields of anthropology and sociology, so he denounced it as an 'error [which] constitutes a confusion of kinds engendered by vague thought' (p. 487). Indeed, Nordau goes on to write that Zola's Naturalism amounts to no more than 'anthropomorphism and symbolism, consequent on undeveloped or mystically confused thought, which is found among savages in a natural form, and among the whole category of degenerates in an atavistic form of mental activity' (p. 494). In making the link between the artist's body and literary production outlined in his thesis, Nordau concludes that Zola's novels do not prove that things are badly managed in this world, but merely that his 'nervous system is out of order' (p. 499).

However, there were some critics who rejected Nordau's methodology in applying criminal degeneration theory to artists. Most awkwardly, disapproval came from Cesare Lombroso, to whom Nordau had dedicated *Entartung*, and who had discussed this subject in *Genius and Insanity* thirty years before. Lombroso describes Nordau as having 'gone astray; convinced of the scope of the new psychiatric weapon which he had in his hands, he has so far overshot the mark as to impair the effect of his

35 Letter to Auguste Dietrich (13 July 1886), in Émile Zola, *Correspondance*, ed. by B. H. Bakker and others, 10 vols (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal; Paris, CNRS, 1978–95), V: 1884–86, ed. by Owen Morgan and Alain Pagès (1985), 419. Further references to this edition will be given by volume and page number in the text and prefixed *Corr.* Dietrich translated many German authors, notably works by Schopenhauer and Max Nordau. His French translation of Nordau's *Die Conventionalen Lügen der Kulturmenschheit* had just been published; the first German edition had been published in 1883. The book was a diatribe against modern society in which Nordau denounces the false idealism of English and German writers, as well as the vision of French Naturalists (see p. 419, n. 2).

purpose'.³⁶ One book-length response to Nordau was *Regeneration: A Reply to Max Nordau*, published by G. P. Putnam's Sons (New York) a year after *Degeneration*, and the anonymous author turned out to be the social philosopher Alfred Egmont Hake. He had denounced Nordau's prescription of authoritarian intervention as a solution to degeneration, and believed instead that moral and religious improvement of mankind was a better response. Of the two reviewers of *Regeneration*, an anonymous *New York Times* critic was completely laudatory, while the sole identified reviewer, Peck, not only used *Regeneration* as a stepping-stone to criticise *Degeneration*, but also criticised *Regeneration* itself for 'the seriousness of its treatment of Nordau' (cited in Maik, p. 614).

Nordau's theory of degeneration is heavily based on Darwin's theory of evolution. Although Darwin does emphasise the role of instinct, Nordau believed that man is a rational creature whose role within the evolution of nature is the development of reason, and natural evolution requires that man suppress instinct and emotion in favour of reason, restraint and discipline. The motor force of evolution is vital energy, which gives man the strength to adapt to new conditions and thus to advance. To be able to adapt, man must have an exact knowledge of the world. Hence progress involves the expansion of consciousness and the restriction of the unconscious. Science is the highest of human endeavours, religion the most regressive. Art is little better than religion and, to the extent that it does not equate beauty and eugenic advantage or serve the social function of ennobling the common man, is harmful and should be resisted.³⁷ If vital energy was the driving force of evolutionary progress, then its absence signified degeneration. Because progress was a question of biological and moral — not just aesthetic — concern, if degeneration were allowed to develop, it would mean the end of civilised life and Nordau suggested the term *fin-de-race* as a more accurate description for *fin-de-siècle* (Baldwin, p. 106). In identifying cultural decline with a lack of energy, the so-called 'abulia', Koenraad W. Swart notes that Nordau was in agreement with many of his contemporaries (cited in Baldwin, p. 106).

36 Cesare Lombroso, cited in Linda L. Maik, 'Nordau's *Degeneration*: The American Controversy', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 50 (1989), 607–23 (p. 614).

37 P. M. Baldwin, 'Liberalism, Nationalism, and Degeneration: The Case of Max Nordau', *Central European History*, 13 (1980), 99–120 (pp. 101–02).

ii) Types of degeneration

This concept of national decline through lack of energy can be seen in Zola's portrayal of the Second Empire in *La Débâcle*. The problem is shown to stem from the heart of the regime, with Napoleon III himself depicted as experiencing extreme physical suffering in the novel. This physical malaise from France's political centre spreads as if it were a contagious disease to the rest of the nation, extending from the degenerate bourgeoisie to the army. As a result, the diminished French military forces are unable to match the strong Prussian army. In showing France's spectacularly disastrous war campaign, plus the national unrest of the Commune immediately afterwards, it would seem that Zola is, on the face of it, supporting Nordau's notion of the logical endpoint of degeneration being the end of civilised life.

Zola's portrayal of the physically and morally stronger Prussia over a weak and degenerate France comes at a time when there is widespread belief in different human types, some being stronger than others. During the last years of his life, Sir Francis Galton devoted himself to promoting the political programme of eugenics. In 1883, he had created the word 'eugenics' out of the Greek roots for 'beautiful' and 'heredity'. He meant the word to denote both the science and the practice of improving human stock 'to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable'.³⁸

The idea of human types was already ingrained in society with that of the Jew, a representation that was supported by medical authorities. Nervousness, femininity, cowardliness and even genius referred to what were understood as the main attributes of the decadent, Jewish body. They represented the stigmata of Jean-Martin Charcot's 'iconography of hysteria', by which the wandering Jew served as a model for a physically weak human type especially liable to nervous diseases.³⁹

38 Ruth Schwartz Cowan, 'Galton, Sir Francis (1822–1911)', *ODNB* online edn <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/33315>>

39 Robert van der Laarse, 'Masking the Other: Max Nordau's Representation of Hidden Jewishness', *Historical Reflections*, 25 (1999), 1–31 (p. 21).

iii) Zola and Nordau: nation-building, the body, race

Nordau's concept of degeneration, and particularly his notion of *fin-de-race*, provides a constructive framework that allows us to uncover the dynamics of the degenerative state of the Second Empire. However, it would also be beneficial to compare the wider political ideas of Nordau and Zola on nation-building and the means by which this is possible. Although Nordau believed Zola to be a degenerate writer and therefore a threat to civilisation, their similar views on what makes a good nation brings the two closer together than Nordau's opinion on Zola would allow. Highlighting their political views will help to understand Zola's position as an author looking back to the Second Empire from the Third Republic. As Zola was a staunch republican, it will also help clarify why his myths in the *Rougon-Macquart* focus on bodily and political sickness in the Second Empire.

I will analyse Zola's *La Débâcle* later in this chapter, but it should be mentioned at this point that the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune, both of which are depicted in the novel, were turning points for France. Napoleon III's defeat caused the collapse of his Second Empire in 1870, and the Third Republic was then established. As a committed Republican who had lambasted the Second Empire in his *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, Zola was keen for a new republican regime to succeed. However, in his article in *Le Figaro* in 1880, Zola expressed his anger at fellow republicans calling him a traitor for publishing in that newspaper and took the opportunity to criticise a divided Republic:

Serait-ce la République de M. Gambetta que j'ai trahie, cette République optimiste et satisfaite, qui jouit de sa victoire et répond béatement de l'avenir, au milieu des secousses quotidiennes dont le pays s'exaspère peu à peu? Serait-ce plutôt la République de M. Henri Rochefort, qui déclare imbécile et infâme la République de M. Gambetta, et qui, chaque matin, mange à la fourchette une tranche grillée du dictateur, en jurant que nous allons à tous les abîmes? Ou bien encore serait-ce la République de M. Clemenceau que j'aurais vendue pour de forts appointements dans ce journal? La République de M. Clemenceau dévore aussi la République de M. Gambetta, tout en étant secrètement furieuse contre la République de M. Rochefort, dont les drôleries amusantes ont coupé net tout succès aux formules sévères. [...] Ils prendront, chacun dans son coin, le droit de mettre en poudre la République du voisin, au profit d'une République toute personnelle [...] Tous traîtres alors! Tous tapent sur la République, quand elle n'est pas leur République. [...] Ces gens auront chacun une République à l'usage de ses goûts et de ses ambitions.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Émile Zola, 'Les trente-six républiques', *Le Figaro* (27 September 1880), in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Mitterand, XIV (1969), 441–46 (pp. 441–43).

It is clear that Zola is frustrated with politicians being more concerned, in his view, with personal ambition than with the higher aspiration of securing a strong republic. Through the following of personal agendas and general discord between politicians, Zola is portraying a Third Republic that is fragmented at the political level.

The same desire to construct a strong society is certainly behind Nordau's writing of *Degeneration*, but it is particularly in his advocacy of working towards the building of a Zionist nation that Nordau begins to resemble Zola's own position in what is needed for a strong French republic. Todd Samuel Presner observes that, in Nordau's opening speech at the second Zionist Congress in Basle on 28 August 1898, he invented the concept of the 'muscle Jew'. This new type of Jew 'corporeally strong, sexually potent, [and] morally fit' was the precondition for realising the national goals of Zionism.⁴¹ For Nordau, the regeneration of the Jewish race would come through moral and physical rebirth (p. 270). Presner contends that Nordau's articulation of the muscle Jew was informed by the same logic of 'education, discipline, and regeneration' found in *Degeneration* six years previously (p. 275). All the traits that Nordau attributed to the 'true modern' in 1892 — health and originality of race, clarity of vision and purpose, strength of body, depth of discipline, ability to adapt — have, according to Presner, been transposed to the muscle Jew (p. 276), which is in direct contrast to the stereotype of the physically weak Jew in the nineteenth century. For Nordau, the individuals that constitute a nation should themselves be physically, mentally, and morally strong. Zola's portrayal of a physically sick Napoleon III in *La Débâcle* is a warning that France as a nation cannot possibly prosper if its highest political body is what Nordau would describe as degenerate. In *Le Docteur Pascal*, which will be discussed in chapter 4, Pascal's newborn son — free from the degenerative *fêlure* of the Rougon-Macquart family — represents hope for France.

Another link between Zola and Nordau is that they both believe that society should be based on patriarchy and heterosexuality. Presner's observation about the etymology of the word 'degeneration' clearly reflects the attitude of the Third Republic to the idea of what is 'normal'. As Presner notes, the German verb *entarten* ('to degenerate') means 'to be untrue to form or kind'. It implies a process of withdrawal (*ent-arten*) or movement away from an idea or, at least, a normative type. In English and French, the word *degenerate* (from the Latin *degeneratus*) also contains the idea of

41 Todd Samuel Presner, "'Clear Heads, Solid Stomachs, and Hard Muscles': Max Nordau and the Aesthetics of Jewish Regeneration', *Modernism/Modernity*, 10 (2003), 269–96 (p. 269).

a debased movement away from a norm while implying the idea of a ‘natural’ form, namely a ‘race’ or genus. Therefore, to be degenerate means ‘to deviate from one’s race or kind’ (p. 277). The danger posed by degenerates, Nordau maintains, is that they throw the binary organisation of the world into ‘mystical disarray’ (p. 278). Again, a society based on heterosexual relations is what Zola uses as a foundation in *Le Docteur Pascal*. As I shall discuss in chapter 4, the ‘redemption’ of the French nation relies on such a society.

In contrast to his imperious articulation of ideas in *Degeneration*, Nordau’s impulse for a better society is expressed in a more moderate way in his 1883 publication *Die konventionellen Lügen der Kulturmenschheit* (*The Conventional Lies of Civilised Mankind*). This book made Nordau a household name in many parts of the world. Within seven months of publication, seven editions had appeared. Eight weeks after distribution had begun, the Imperial Council of Vienna prohibited further sales of the book and confiscated all the copies it could find. The book was publicly burned, condemned by the Pope and banned by Tsarist Russia. Within two years, three separate editions appeared in America. Translations were published in Italian, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Spanish, Romanian, Czech, Hungarian, Hebrew, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Greek, and Turkish.⁴²

In *Lügen*, Nordau promoted a new society based on reason, social justice, freedom, fraternity, and altruism (the opposite of destructive egotism), a social vision which Meir Ben-Horin calls ‘solidaritarianism’. In order to create such a society, Nordau believed it was necessary to address the primary ‘conventional lies’, which were ‘the religious lie’, ‘the monarchic-aristocratic lie’, ‘the economic lie’, and ‘the marriage lie’ (p. 332). Nordau exhibits real humanity when he writes about the economic and marriage ‘lies’, as his primary interest is in protecting the poor and women on these two issues. He comes very close to Zola’s position against the Church and monarchy with the other two ‘conventional lies’, when he shows himself unconvinced by why these institutions should be respected. In common with Zola’s frustrations with Third Republic politicians, Nordau writes that ‘parliament is an institution for satisfying the vanity and the ambition of its members and for advancing their personal interests’ (Ben-Horin, p. 337).

Nordau’s desire for an improved humanity comes very close to Zola’s vision in *Le*

42 Meir Ben-Horin, ‘Watchman, What of the Lies? — Nordau’s *Lügen* at 100’, *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*, 33 (1984), 330–42 (pp. 331–32).

Docteur Pascal when he writes, ‘Do everything possible which promotes the wellbeing of mankind; avoid everything that causes mankind damage or pain [...] the species wants to live [...] [f]lourishing mankind is your paradise; stunted mankind is your hell’ (Ben-Horin, p. 341). Despite Nordau’s dire warnings about the perils that civilisation might face in *Degeneration*, in *Lügen*, published before *Degeneration*, Nordau shows the same optimism as Zola does in *Le Docteur Pascal* when he claims that ‘[h]umanity is not senile. It is still young, and a moment of over-exertion is not fatal for youth; it can recover itself’ (Nordau, p. 540).

Given that this chapter discusses degeneration, both that of the human organism and of nations, it would be useful to understand Nordau’s and Zola’s individual response to how the body relates to ‘race’, of which there are multiple definitions that relate to how they both view degeneration. Both use the term in the sense of the ‘human race’, but Nordau’s belonging to the Jewish ‘race’ creates a sociological and cultural dimension to the term. In Zola’s use of the term in his novels, there is a strong sociological and political meaning. He uses ‘race’ to describe the Rougon-Macquart family, distinguishing them physiologically from the rest of society, as it is their degenerative bloodline that sets them apart. It is the representation of the weak and the strong body, determined socially, culturally and politically, that links how Nordau and Zola view ‘race’. In both cases, the body is a measure of the moral and political health of the society in which it exists.

In considering the reason why Nordau wrote *Entartung*, Söder sees a personal motivation as he attributes it to Nordau’s own Jewish background. According to him, it was the result of Nordau’s struggle not to be perceived as part of an ‘effeminate’ and ‘degenerate’ race (p. 478). It was Nordau’s ‘preemptive strike’, ‘shadowboxing’ with the widely held view that Jews were more prone to degeneration than non-Jews (Söder, p. 479). The view of a Jewish predisposition for nervous affectations was supported by the testimony of medical authorities such as Charcot and Richard von Krafft-Ebing (Söder, p. 479). Söder writes that Nordau drew up plans of a society that was nourished by Kant’s categorical imperative, and thereby would make a society of enlightened and unbiased individuals possible — this future society no longer needed to operate with images of the ‘Other’ or similar ideological constructions (pp. 480–81). Söder concludes that the Decadents’ obscuring of reason and value were sabotaging his project for a secular, enlightened world in which the legacies of Judaism were no longer an issue (p. 482).

In his book-length response to *Entartung*, Alfred E. Hake sees Nordau's German nationality as the driving force behind the writing of the book. However, this is done 'unconsciously'.⁴³ It is his 'thoroughly German' (Hake, p. 12) nationality which has moulded his views and ideals. In *Entartung*, Nordau had warned of the threat to moral and political order, and Hake views this through Nordau's nationality, as it is 'natural [to] the German people' (Hake, p. 14) to associate moral and political order, good administration, and personal protection, with feudal institutions. In Nordau's pinpointing of France as the seat of degeneration, Hake sees this as an extension of the national enmity between Germany and France, which he describes as 'only human' and 'natural' (Hake, pp. 24, 25). Hake argues that the unification of the German States into one empire proved to be regressive, contrary to the expectation of Germans. The future peace and goodwill among the nations was destroyed by the annexation of the two provinces conquered from France, which created potential civil unrest and sacrifices to ward off the consequences of retrogression in foreign politics (Hake, p. 298). In contrast to Germany's 'coming catastrophe' (Hake, pp. 301–02), Hake holds England up as the 'standard-bearer of civilization' (Hake, p. 305).

The strength of the myth and stereotype of the Jew were strong enough to make Nordau react against them. The same stereotype seems to be perpetuated by Zola in his novel *L'Argent* (1891), in his depiction of the Jewish banker Gundersmann. His banking rival Saccard hates and admires him in equal measure. At one point, Saccard describes the ability of the Jew to be able to save himself when in trouble: 'C'est le don de la race, sa raison d'être à travers les nationalités qui se font et se défont'.⁴⁴ When there are rumours contesting the solidity of Saccard's bank, Saccard believes that 'les sales juifs', led by Gundersmann, are out to crush him (*RM*, V, 275).

Of course, Zola was to show a more supportive side in real life when he uncovered the French prejudice towards Jews when he defended Alfred Dreyfus. His open letter *J'Accuse!* appeared in *L'Aurore* on 13 January 1898, denouncing the French army for falsely accusing Dreyfus of providing military secrets to the Germans. It was a major political crisis which revealed the full extent of anti-Semitism within the French establishment. In his 'Lettre à la France' during the crisis, Zola writes that France has been overwhelmed by the lies of the press and the general atmosphere of 'perversions morales', so it is not surprising that the country's 'intelligence' and 'reason' have been

43 Alfred E. Hake, *Regeneration: A Reply to Max Nordau* (London: Constable; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1896), p. 12. Google ebook.

44 Émile Zola, 'L'Argent', in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, ed. by Lanoux and Mitterand, V (1967), 92.

weakened.⁴⁵ Zola's apprehension of the direct link between morality and the human body is taken further in his 'Lettre' when he applies a bodily metaphor to the immorality of the presence of anti-Semitism in France:

Mais il est des faits plus graves encore, tout un ensemble de symptômes qui font, de la crise que tu traverses [...]. L'aveu terrible est la façon dont tu te comportes dans l'aventure. On a l'air bien portant, et tout d'un coup de petites taches apparaissent sur la peau: la mort est en vous. Tout ton empoisonnement politique et social vient de te monter à la face. (OC, XIV, 915)

In the same way that Nordau's degenerative theory links immorality to the body, so Zola sees anti-Semitism as a physiological presence within the political and social body of France. The anti-Semitism is described as a disease, a 'poison' exhibiting 'symptoms' in the body. This physiological description, however, is transformed into a moral omen when it becomes the 'death within you'. For Zola, if this is not removed, then it would surely mean the inevitable demise of a republican France, so far as the Dreyfus Affair is concerned.

Zola envisaged the solution to be political. In his letter to the French minister Henri Brisson, he is scathing about the government's desire to hold onto power by sacrificing Dreyfus. Zola writes that there is something rotten in France, and that normal life would not return until the health of France has been restored. After which, Zola adds that 'le ministère qui fera la révision, sera le grand ministère, le ministère sauveur, celui qui s'imposera et qui vivra'.⁴⁶ Although the solution must be political, Zola imbues his observation with a moral perspective: the minister who is to rescue France will not only be of a necessarily great stature, but would 'save' in the sense of providing redemption, but not in a religious sense. The preservation of France, for Zola, is as much a moral matter as it is a political one.

It is clear that Zola is a French patriot, and views France and its national fate in material terms, indeed flesh and blood. Nevertheless, the writer Maurice Barrès criticises Zola for his intellectual approach to the Dreyfus Affair, and for his thinking 'tout naturellement en Vénitien déraciné'.⁴⁷ Michel Winock perceives this to mean that Zola was an intellectual who believed that society is founded on logic, which is contrary to what Barrès thinks constitutes a nation. Unfortunately, as Winock explains, the

45 Émile Zola, 'Lettre à la France', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Mitterand, XIV (1969), 911–18 (p. 914).

46 Émile Zola, letter to Henri Brisson (before 16 July 1898), in *Correspondance*, ed. by Morgan and Pagès, IX (1993), 216.

47 Michel Winock, *Le Siècle des intellectuels*, 2nd edn (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999), p. 45.

intellectual ‘ignore ce qu’est l’instinct, la tradition, le goût du terroir, tout ce qui fait une nation de chair et de sang’ (Winock, p. 45). From Winock’s description, it seems that Barrès also believes in the ‘flesh and blood’ of France. In holding this materialist view of nationhood, Barrès might recognise Zola’s depiction of anti-Semitism in France as a seam of immorality, but it is at this point that the similarity between them ends. Barrès sees it as an impurity in the French body which needs to be removed for the sake of an unsullied national heritage. This is because he believed in a notion of rootedness in the French soil, as opposed to an internationalist outlook. Zola, on the other hand, had a universalist outlook, rather than nationalist. It is through his particular idea of nationalism, in opposition to Zola’s, that Barrès believes that ‘préservation sociale’ (Winock, p. 52) to be more valuable than the truth and justice that Zola desires. For Barrès, it is more important to keep the country whole by not supporting the Dreyfusard side.

Zola’s commitment to challenging established political and cultural systems extended to the art world, something that would in itself characterise him as a degenerate in Nordau’s eyes. He held Thursday meetings with artists such as Cézanne, Baille, and the sculptor Philippe Solari, and wrote about the meetings for *L’Événement* in May 1866. In the same year, these accounts were collected in the volume *Mon Salon*, which Henri Mitterand describes as ‘une machine de guerre contre la peinture académique, contre l’institution du jury, contre les grands genres’.⁴⁸

Yet, while Zola is a champion of the new in his support of Manet and Impressionism, he is still alert to contemporary medical thinking, which has partly established the physical stereotype of the weak-bodied Jew. In making the physiological a moral characteristic, Zola ascribes the Rougon-Macquart family *fêlure* to his artist character Claude Lantier in *L’Œuvre*, whose entry on the Rougon-Macquart family tree reads ‘*hérédité d’une névrose se tournant en génie. Peintre*’ (Mitterand, *L’Œuvre*, p. 430). It is the affliction of the family *fêlure* in his blood that compels Claude to pursue a path as a painter in the Realist and Naturalist mode. As such an artist, Claude would certainly be classed as a degenerate by Nordau. He describes writers and painters who work with an Impressionist technique as not seizing the phenomenon as a concept, but only feeling it as ‘simple sense-stimulation’ (Nordau, p. 486). Indeed, for Nordau, the decayed brain centres of degenerates mean that some artists, lacking all discipline, ‘register only nerve vibrations and become Impressionist painters’ (p. xxi).

48 Henri Mitterand, ‘Notice’, in Émile Zola, *L’Œuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), pp. 424–48 (p. 427).

The idea of the weak and the strong body is pivotal for Zola. This is overlaid by his concept of the *fêlure*, which is a physical degeneration of the body in some members of the Rougon-Macquart family. However, this physiological deterioration is also a moral designation of the political health of the Second Empire in which the family live and the historical period which the novels span. Zola sees Napoleon III's reign as one of bourgeois decadence, and his portrayal of it corresponds, albeit from a different perspective, with Nordau's theory that decadence eventually leads to *fin-de-race*. Although both Nordau and Zola see this as critically important for the future of society and humanity in general, it is important to recognise their differing stances. Nordau's *fin-de-race* means the political elite no longer has control, and he interprets this as moral and political disorder. Zola is concerned with the moral and political disorder generated by the Second Empire, so, for him, the political elite does not equate to order. Applying Nordau's conception of degeneration to Zola brings into sharper relief the idea that the more immoral a political system, the more it will impact the people it governs. The impact will be felt in all areas of life, but the insidious nature of the immorality will show tangibly in the body, making it all-consuming and a form of natural evil, for which Zola has created the concept of the *fêlure*.

In Zola's novels, there is a distinction made between the healthy and the degenerate body, and these differing bodies effectively belong to different 'races'. While one is tainted with degeneration, the other is still in a vital, healthy state. In *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret*, Zola describes the inhabitants of the village of les Artaud as 'un peuple à part, une race née du sol, une humanité de trois cents têtes qui recommençaient les temps'.⁴⁹ The villagers are not living in Paris, the centre of degeneration, but in the wilds. They have not lost touch with their natural environment and, by extension, their own bodies. This description of the healthy villagers is to be set against that of the young priest Mouret, who is horrified by his own physicality and surrounding environment.

By contrast to the villagers, Zola's novel *Le Docteur Pascal* documents the slow eradication of the degenerative *fêlure* from the Rougon-Macquart family bloodline through the death by haemorrhaging of Charles. He is in the fifth and final generation of the family, and the degeneration seems to have accumulated within him, as he is fifteen-years-old, but 'en paraissait à peine douze, et il en était resté à l'intelligence balbutiante

49 Émile Zola, 'La Faute de l'abbé Mouret', in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, ed. by Lanoux and Mitterand, I (1960), 1232.

d'un enfant de cinq ans'.⁵⁰ The lack of forward progress which Nordau warns is a symptom of degeneration is certainly present in Charles. Not only is he suffering from arrested development, but he also exhibits the effeminacy which is another symptom of degeneration. At an age when he should be physically developing into an adult, he is described as 'vivant en petit dauphin efféminé d'une antique race déchue' (*RM*, V, 965). Indeed, his appearance is similar to that of a young girl, with his 'larges yeux pâles et le ruissellement de ses cheveux blonds' (*RM*, V, 975).

It is Charles's great-uncle, Doctor Pascal, who understands that his family is set apart by the taint of the *fêlure* within their physiology. The Rougon-Macquart family is an actual race apart from the rest of society. In considering how the *fêlure* has translated itself into alcoholism, megalomania and homicidal tendencies, and other anti-social traits, he wonders whether

les nôtres, dans leur fureur de jouissance, dans la satisfaction gloutonne de leurs appétits, avaient brûlé trop vite [...]. Victor retourné à l'état sauvage, galopant on ne sait au fond de quelles ténèbres; notre pauvre Charles, si beau et si frêle: ce sont là les rameaux derniers de l'Arbre, les dernières tiges pâles où la sève puissante des grosses branches ne semble pas pouvoir monter. (*RM*, V, 1017)

The 'burning' of the appetites, the expending of energy without replenishment, is very close to Nordau's concept of the lack of energy denoting degeneration. The consequence of which, for Zola, is Victor regressing to a 'savage state', and the 'frail' Charles. These two characters are in the fourth and fifth generations of the family, and we are reminded of the healthy villagers of les Artaud when Zola writes that they are the 'last pale stalks' of the Tree where the sap is unable to reach. The Tree is of course the family tree, but Zola always reminds the reader of the natural environment, which represents an authentic, timeless place of health.

However, Doctor Pascal is optimistic about the state of the human race. As with Nature itself, he describes families as 'l'éternel devenir. Elles plongent, au-delà de l'ancêtre commun, à travers les couches insondables des races qui ont vécu, jusqu'au premier être; et elles pousseront sans fin, elles s'étaleront, se ramifieront à l'infini, au fond des âges futurs' (*RM*, V, 1017). Humanity will renew itself

dans la reconstitution journalière de la race par le sang nouveau qui lui vient du dehors. Chaque mariage apporte d'autres éléments, bons ou mauvais, dont l'effet est quand même d'empêcher la dégénérescence

⁵⁰ Émile Zola, 'Le Docteur Pascal', in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, ed. by Lanoux and Mitterand, V (1967), 965.

mathématique et progressive. Les brèches sont réparées, les tares s'effacent, un équilibre fatal se rétablit au bout de quelques générations, et c'est l'homme moyen qui finit toujours par en sortir, l'humanité vague, obstinée à son labeur mystérieux, en marche vers son but ignoré. (*RM*, V, 1018)

At first glance, this improvement of humanity through Nature's progression is very similar to Nordau's theory of man and nature being governed by the same organic laws. However, Zola is concerned with the ultimate health of humanity, which may be made impossible by political regimes such as the Second Empire, which are themselves corrupt. Nordau's version of natural evolution is more concerned about creating a healthy society, that is, a society free of degeneration and which is constantly progressing. Nordau's concept of human solidarity was based upon his view of the unity of all living matter within a scientifically determined universe. The unity of men, created through organic laws, is an evolutionary necessity. If men could only discipline themselves to stay within the 'truth' of natural evolution, a new civilisation would develop. He writes in *Paradoxes* (1885) that it would be better if the mass of men would follow the elite, who through superior knowledge and force of will could assume a natural leadership (Introduction, *Degeneration*, p. xix).

Nordau saw a very clear link between biological life and the ideal structure of human society and civilisation:

But all progress rests on this, that the highest [nervous] centres assume more and more authority over the entire organism, that judgment and will control and direct ever more strictly the instincts and passions. (p. 313)

And

We know that man, like every other complex and highly developed living being, is a society or state, of simpler, and of simplest, living beings, of cells, and cell-systems, or organs, all having their own functions and wants [...]. The highest function of life yet known to us is clear consciousness; the most elevated content of consciousness is knowledge; and the most obvious and immediate aim of knowledge is constantly to procure better conditions of life for the organism, hence to preserve its existence as long as possible [...]. In order that the collective organism may be able to perform its task, its constituent parts are bound to submit to a severe hierarchical order. Anarchy in its interior is disease, and leads rapidly to death. (p. 409)

Human society itself, for Nordau, is a biological organism which needs to rely on the discernment of its 'best' individuals in order to survive. The relationship between

society and its people is one of metonymy, as individuals are the cells or organs of the social body. The qualities of judgment and will that are needed to steer society toward survival are of the utmost importance because ‘all progress rests on this’. Without these standards, society and civilisation would collapse. ‘Knowledge’, provided by the clearest intellects, is, then, the most valuable asset in society because it will ‘preserve its existence’. A social hierarchy is necessary in order that these elite people will be able to keep society running optimally. In accordance with Nordau’s biological vision of society, disease would occur, then death, if this strict hierarchical order were not maintained. In his comparison of anarchy with disease, Nordau may well have been alluding to the rise of anarchism in the 1890s.

It is, therefore, not surprising to find that Nordau favours a political structure that replicates his biological social vision:

There is at the present time a widespread conviction that the enthusiasm for equality was a grievous error of the great Revolution. A doctrine opposed to all natural laws is justly resisted. Humanity has need of a hierarchy. It must have leaders and models. It cannot do without an aristocracy. (Nordau, p. 472)

Nordau’s desire for hierarchy in society, albeit an intellectual one, means that a republic is out of the question because equality cannot maintain the necessary progress of society. A republic, for Nordau, being ‘opposed to all natural laws’, cannot even be an option as it would conflict with what would ‘naturally’ bring health to a society. The best structure on which a society should operate is, then, led by an intellectual aristocracy, clear in mind and purpose. Nordau’s proposed model of society is the opposite of Zola’s wish for a republic, in which individuals are deemed equal.

iv) Degeneration in *La Débâcle*

Degeneration as described by Nordau — the lack of energy leading to exhaustion and potential *fin-de-race* — is prominent in Zola’s *La Débâcle*, even if their political views are very different. It recounts the disastrous Franco-Prussian War, which was a disaster and humiliation for France, and is shown by Zola to be a disorganised, failing nation. Their enemies are the emerging German States headed by Prussia, a new nation full of youthful vigour, outflanking France with its decisive orderliness in the war. Parts 1 and 2 of the novel show the disorderly nature of France’s campaign, leading to low morale

and unnecessary suffering of the troops. Part 3 shows the lowly France effectively under the control of Prussia, and this leads to an eruption of the civil war of the Commune in Paris.

The degeneration is on a national and political level. It is the bourgeois decadence of Napoleon III's Second Empire which establishes the degeneration. From this political figurehead, the sickness spreads to the rest of society, physically from body to body. However, as the degeneration is also a moral sickness, there are some characters who are not affected by it, notably the non-bourgeois ones. This section will discuss how the discourse of degeneration is played out in *La Débâcle*, focusing on how it seeps downwards from Napoleon III to affect the French army and the bourgeois character Maurice. These degenerate bodies will be in contrast to the character Jean, who, as a peasant labourer, is still in touch with the natural environment and is unaffected by the scourge of degeneration.

The myth of Napoleon

The physical symptoms of degeneration exhibited by Napoleon III in *La Débâcle* represent the immorality of the Second Empire and its bourgeoisie. The novel's portrayal of the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune are historical events which occur at the end of the Second Empire, both of which caused the eventual downfall of the regime. The moral decline through degeneration that Zola shows in the novel mirrors his descriptions of the discord between the bourgeoisie and the working class. This social friction becomes a critical factor in the creation of the Paris Commune. Since Napoleon III's *coup d'état* of 2 December 1851 which ended the Second French Republic, the Second Empire, from its beginning to its end, struggled with class conflict.

The historian John Merriman describes the difficult relations between the classes in France during the 1850s and 1860s. He writes that some Parisians, on hearing of the *coup d'état*, formed uprisings in working-class districts in central and eastern parts of the city because they were unwilling to live under another empire. More than 125,000 people, the majority of them *paysans*, took up arms to defend the Republic. The population of Paris almost doubled during the 1850s and 1860s, rising from a little more than one million in 1851 to almost two million people by 1870. Each year during the

Second Empire tens of thousands of immigrants poured into the capital from the Parisian basin, the north, Picardie, Normandy, Champagne, and Lorraine, among other regions, mostly male labourers even poorer than the Parisians already there, attracted by the possibility of construction work.⁵¹

As Merriman points out, this influx of working-class people made the inhabitants of the *beaux quartiers* of western Paris feel uncomfortable living in what they perceived to be a sordid capital of immorality and vice, its dark *quartiers* the preserve of the ‘dangerous and labouring classes’. Most of these people may have never actually seen these places, but popular literature placed this image in the upper-class imagination (p. 5). The prefect of the Seine, Baron Georges Haussmann, declared that ‘bringing order to this Queen City is one of the first conditions of general security’ (p. 6). His building of the new boulevards in Paris thus embodied the ‘imperialism of the straight line’, which Merriman points out were intended not only to quash uprisings but also to display the modernity and might of the empire. They provided power alleys down which troops could march in showy processions (p. 7). Rather than staving off class strife, the rebuilding of Paris only accentuated the contrast between the more prosperous western arrondissements and the poor eastern and north-eastern *quartiers*, the so-called ‘People’s Paris’ (p. 8).

Throughout *La Débâcle*, Napoleon III and his wife Eugénie strive to project the might of the emperor and his empire. This power, however, is shown to be severely lacking and is in fact a principle of corruption in the novel. Through political corruption, imperial strength has degraded to an absence of vitality, and this atrophy has led to the degeneration which is clearly portrayed within Napoleon III and his army in the novel.

It is the Napoleonic myth, the relation between Napoleon I and his nephew Napoleon III, which will be of interest in this thesis. Napoleon Bonaparte was the first French emperor, and Zola shows Napoleon III trying to emulate his uncle’s legendary stature and military exploits. The legacy of Napoleon I lies heavy in the novel as his nephew and wife try to keep the myth alive in order to remain emperor and empress. Napoleon III is in the position of reaching back to the myth of his uncle, while being himself a very pale imitation in a time of war, or indeed a parody, given his ineffectiveness as a leader. While Napoleon Bonaparte is almost a figure of mythology,

⁵¹ John Merriman, *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune of 1871* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 4.

his nephew represents a degenerated version of his uncle.

Napoleon Bonaparte had risen to power a decade after the events of 1789, and ushered in a political class with aspirations for national renewal. Bonaparte seems to have perceived himself as an agent for what he called ‘a universal regeneration which Nature herself demanded’.⁵² In his *Tableau politique de la France régénérée* (1800), it is clear that Jean Baptiste Bonnet de Treyches believes fully in the regenerating powers of Bonaparte. He writes of the new Consulat that ‘elle ouvrira toutes les sources de la félicité publique, ranimera l’esprit public, vivifiera le commerce, enflammera tous les cœurs de l’amour sacré de la patrie, et enfantera des prodiges’ (cited in Sainson, p. 11).

It is upon Bonaparte’s mythical standing as a figure of national and political regeneration that Napoleon III is trying to model himself. As such, he states that ‘I believe that there are certain men who are born to serve as a means for the march of the human race... I consider myself to be one of these’ (Merriman, p. 3). His enemies, however, called him ‘the [Napoleonic] hat without the head’ and, as the poor continued to struggle under the Second Empire, Victor Hugo dubbed him ‘*Napoléon le petit*’ (Merriman, pp. 3, 4).

The young Louis had grown up fascinated by his uncle Napoleon and, at the age of thirteen, he had spoken of the Emperor’s ‘shadow’ which made him strive to be ‘worthy of the great name of Napoleon’.⁵³ In 1839 Louis published his book *Des Idées Napoléoniennes*, which vigorously defended the Napoleonic heritage and praised the emperor as ‘the messiah of new ideas’ (Hazareesingh, p. 211). In his book, he sets out his vision of civilisation: ‘We advance from Alexander to Caesar, from Caesar to Constantine, from Constantine to Charlemagne, from Charlemagne to Napoleon.’ David Baguley notes that this vision proposes that great men mark the progress of humanity.⁵⁴ Being part of the Napoleonic dynasty, there is also the implication that Louis himself will be one of these great men advancing French civilisation. Of course, Zola thoroughly contests this notion of Napoleon III as a civilising agent in his *Rougon-Macquart*.

Sudhir Hazareesingh makes the distinction between the ‘myth’ of Napoleon and his ‘legend’. The myth was the attempt by Napoleon to control his public image, from

52 Melvin Lasky, cited in Katia Sainson, “‘Le Régénérateur de la France’: Literary Accounts of Napoleonic Regeneration 1799–1805’, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 30 (2001–02), 9–25 (p. 11).

53 Sudhir Hazareesingh, *The Legend of Napoleon* (London: Granta Books, 2004), p. 191.

54 David Baguley, *Napoleon III and His Regime: An Extravaganza* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), p. 167.

his early military propaganda to the publication of the *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*. His legend was a much broader phenomenon, which developed in France after 1815 (p. 4).⁵⁵ In his analysis of the Napoleonic legend, Hazareesingh sees the politics and mythology as indissociable (p. 6). This alliance between the holding of power and the control of public image is, in this thesis, something that Napoleon's nephew Louis must manage in the Second Empire as Napoleon III. When the French army is in disarray in *La Débâcle*, which will be discussed later in this chapter, Zola shows that imperial authority, power, and image have all become degenerative elements within Napoleon III as a political figure.

Jean Gilbert Victor Fialin, known as Fialin de Persigny, was a devoted advocate of the Bonapartist project, and his *Lettres de Londres* (1840) launched Louis's own 'imperial legend'. Fialin wrote that France was in search of a new faith and that Louis Napoleon was the apostle of this millennium (Hazareesingh, p. 212). Hazareesingh considers that Fialin de Persigny's account of Louis's place in the Napoleonic tradition was completely mythologised (p. 213).

The corruption of the Second Empire begins with its inception, when Louis stages a *coup d'état* on 2 December 1851. The shadow of Napoleon haunts this date, as Louis had chosen it as the anniversary of both the crowning of Napoleon in 1804 and the Battle of Austerlitz in 1805 when his uncle had defeated the Austrians and Russians (Hazareesingh, p. 226). The secret file of plans and proclamations for the *coup d'état* was named 'Operation Rubicon' (Baguley, p. 13), which signalled the extent of Louis's ambitions. The name recalls Julius Caesar's illegal crossing of a stream which marked the ancient boundary between Italy and Cisalpine Gaul in 49 BC with his army. It was an act which committed him to a civil war against the Senate and Pompey.

The *coup d'état* had decreed the dissolution of the Assembly and the institution of a state of siege in the Parisian military region. Republicans in twenty-seven departments in central France and the Midi revolted. The repression was savage, with around 27,000 people arrested (Hazareesingh, pp. 226–28). The fiercest fighting took place on the afternoon of Bloody Thursday the 4th, with hundreds of insurgents manning some seventy barricades in the area surrounded by the rue Montmartre, the rue Rambuteau, and the rue du Temple. Historians number the deaths of civilians on that day at 400, with 26 or 27 soldiers, but there was also an indeterminate number of summary

55 On the distinction between myth and legend, see Frédéric Bluche, *Le Bonapartisme: aux origines de la droite autoritaire, 1800–1850* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1980), pp. 168–69.

executions (Baguley, pp. 15–16). There were massive arrests throughout the country, and martial law was imposed on thirty-two departments until March 1852 (Baguley, p. 16). From a total of 27,000 people arrested, 239 were sent to Devil's Island, 9500 to Algeria, 1500 were expelled from France, and 3000 imprisoned (Howard C. Payne, cited in Baguley, p. 16, n. 11).

Baguley points out the moral rebuke that lies within the metaphorical language of Louis's opponents in indicating that if 2 December 1851 was the transgression, then 4 December was the 'crime' and 'original sin' of the future Second Empire regime (p. 16). Hazareesingh detects guilt for the violence of the *coup d'état* on Louis's part: when Louis won the popular vote of the December 1851 plebiscite which overwhelmingly endorsed his coup, he declared that it had 'absolved' him (p. 228).

Hardened Bonapartists like Morny (Louis's half-brother) and many of their reactionary supporters, whether monarchists or right-wing republicans, justified the repressive measures as the prevention of the threat of the 'red peril' or of a new *jacquerie*. According to them, this was essential to the survival of civilised society which the *coup d'état* had supposedly saved (Baguley, p. 17).

In his article of 29 August 1869 in the opposition newspaper *La Tribune*, Zola writes of the 'evil act' of the coup in addressing the Second Empire regime:

Cherchez plutôt à effacer la tache de sang qui souille, à la première page, l'histoire du second Empire. Appelez vos fonctionnaires, appelez vos soldats, et qu'ils s'usent les doigts à vouloir enlever cette tache. Après vous, elle reparaitra, elle grandira et coulera sur toutes les autres pages.⁵⁶

The entanglement of Louis with his uncle's Napoleonic myth is clear for Baguley, who claims that Louis entered into a 'politics of illusion'. This renewal of the dynasty necessitated the need for an heir, epic achievements, a sumptuous court, and the constant obligation to 'match' the feats of the previous Empire (p. 95). Napoleon I himself understood the importance of the preservation of the hereditary line, as he had decreed that all male children born in the family were to be called Napoleon (Baguley, p. 104). Baguley observes that this has the effect of elevating his own first name to an extended patronymic status, so that 'patriarchy [is] emanating from the self'. The clan appellation came to acquire a totemic function, so that the Bonapartes were not only named, they were a caste. Finally, as Baguley indicates, there is no place in the system for the individual as he is first and foremost *homo napoleoniensis* (p. 105). As part of

⁵⁶ Émile Zola, 'Causerie', *La Tribune* (29 August 1869), in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Mitterand, XIII (1969), 244-47 (p. 244).

the imperial propaganda campaign, the iconography that was used to represent Napoleon III during the Second Empire displayed, according to Baguley, a 'Second Empiress' or 'Napoleonism', whereby the image was emptied of any natural or particular features (p. 158).

Between June 1868 and August 1870 Zola wrote political articles for republican newspapers, denouncing the extravagances and injustices of the imperial regime, notably in *La Tribune*, *Le Rappel*, and *La Cloche* (Baguley, p. 280).⁵⁷ Zola also took part in the republican campaign to recall the bloody foundations of the imperial regime, attacking the *coup d'état* and the systematic veil cast over the compromising political deeds of the regime (Baguley, pp. 280–81).

The downfall of Napoleon III after the resounding Franco-Prussian victory had enormous consequences for France, and the defeat was deemed to be such a disaster by the National Assembly in Bordeaux that it passed a resolution expelling the emperor and his dynasty, declaring it responsible for 'the ruin, the invasion, and the dismemberment of France' (Baguley, p. 387).

In 1870, Napoleon III pushed France into war with Prussia and its south German allies, despite French forces having been defeated in Mexico in 1867. He may have assumed that war with Prussia would bring a relatively easy victory, thereby enhancing his prestige. He had previously used French victories in the Crimean War of 1853–56 and against Austria in 1859 to remind his people and the rest of Europe of the strength of his empire. Despite Napoleon III's hopes of a favourable result, the general unpreparedness of the French army, described so clearly by Zola in *La Débâcle*, was its undoing. French commanders had little idea of the cohesive and organised Prussian general staff relentlessly overseen since 1857 by Helmuth von Moltke. In sharp contrast, France had no head of the general staff. In principle the emperor commanded the army, and he assumed that the fact that he was Bonaparte's nephew would suffice (Merriman, pp. 18, 21).

Although Zola does bring to attention the many operational inadequacies of the French army in *La Débâcle*, his main focus is on France's dire state of degeneration which is embodied by its emperor. Zola portrays it as a sickness, at once physiological and moral, and the army's deficiencies are merely confirmation of this corruption.

Hannah Thompson considers that depictions of the body during the Franco-

⁵⁷ For more on this subject, see Henri Mitterand, *Zola journaliste: de l'affaire Manet à l'affaire Dreyfus* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1962), p. 92.

Prussian war by Zola and other Third Republic writers indicate an anxiety over selfhood and national identity. These bodies convey ‘unspeakable’ truths, and also reveal the traumatic truths about French national identity after France’s heavy defeat by the Prussians.⁵⁸ Through the questioning of the association of manliness and the male body under the conditions of war, Thompson proposes that these writers have propelled masculinity into full visibility by separating biological sex from their usual gender attributes. It is the breaking of this taboo, in its direct commentary on patriarchy itself, which is proof, for Thompson, that the national trauma of defeat by the Prussians has been transposed into fiction (p. 65). These male bodies act as a set of coded references to France’s defeat in 1870 and the subsequent attempts to rebuild the country. The body in these war narratives, for Thompson, symbolises the state (p. 66). In contrast to my own argument, Thompson considers that Zola did not blame the French defeat on the ailing body of the Emperor, his ‘impotence’ being a part of his ‘impaired masculinity’ (p. 67). Instead, Zola uses Napoleon III’s body to symbolise the defeat: the fall of the Second Empire is ‘symbolically written’ on the bodies of those who have most indulged in the excesses of the regime (p. 68). The destruction of the Emperor’s manliness, as a ‘signifier of disintegration and dissolution’ is a marker of national rather than personal weakness, and this corresponds to the ‘unspeakable truth’ of the weakened French nation (p. 69). However, the initially taboo ‘unmanning’ of the male body should be seen as positive if it means that conceptions of national and individual identity can be facilitated rather than hindered (p. 81).

In her study of the relationship between the material world and the human body which is seen through metonymy and metaphor, Susan Harrow’s analysis is revealing about the corruption of Napoleon III and his Second Empire. The demanding corporeal experience of the individual soldier depicted in *La Débâcle* — suffering from exhaustion, starvation, sickness, and mutilation — represents the micro-history of France, and this inflects the macro-history of the agonising body politic of France.⁵⁹ Harrow notes that the novel’s tropes of feeding and nourishment are metaphorically reworked to show the empire’s harmful effects on the soldiers. One example given is the phrase ‘ils nous font cuire’, which illustrates the soldiers’ perception of their unnecessary exposure to danger owing to the incompetence of their superiors. A second

58 Hannah Thompson, *Taboo: Corporeal Secrets in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), p. 63.

59 Susan Harrow, ‘Food, Mud, Blood: The Material Narrative of Zola’s *La Débâcle*’, *Dalhousie French Studies*, 76 (2006), 51–61 (p. 52).

example is ‘ils nous bourrent les oreilles’, which is the ‘force-feeding’ of soldiers with propaganda. Harrow describes this as the mental ‘stuffing’ of the men with the empty values of the imperial body politic (p. 54). Harrow observes that matter reverts to metaphor when the collective human body of the soldiers coalesces with mud to form a ‘flot bourbeux’, which marks one stage of the progress of the human body towards its eclipse (p. 56). In contrast, the body of Napoleon III is all too palpable as ‘the flows of mud and blood converge in the body politic’. Harrow describes him as ‘dysfunctional within [...] and without’, as there are stones in his gut and ‘[i]l est dans la fange et dans la boue’. He is in muck, and muck is in him. For Harrow, the emperor’s imperial decomposition has its metaphoric outflow from the mud and blood (p. 58, n. 18).

Throughout the novel, Napoleon III is portrayed as a sickly individual who is unable to act as an effective decision-maker or leader. It is this lack of strong leadership at a time of crisis that Zola shows to be a significant cause of France’s downfall during the war. To some extent, France’s imperial past gives false hope to those waging war, and, after two heavy defeats, it is abundantly clear to Napoleon III’s aides that he does not have the war prowess of his uncle. However, the empress Eugénie is happy to send as many Frenchmen to their death as necessary in order that the Napoleonic dynasty remains intact and that her husband remains emperor.

At the start of the novel, Maurice is for the war. He compares nature itself to constant combat where victory belonged to the most worthy, and where strength was maintained and renewed through action.⁶⁰ Maurice finds himself stuck for two weeks with other soldiers, not moving forward, and this inaction is described as ‘une irréparable faute, une chance perdue de victoire’ (*RM*, V, 409). This suspension seems to emanate from the sick emperor, who is incapable of decision-making: it is a paralysis that threatens to ‘envahir l’armée entière, la désorganiser, l’annihiler, la jeter aux pires désastres, sans qu’elle pût se défendre’ (*RM*, V, 410).

Napoleon III is depicted in the novel as suffering from an initially unspecified physical ailment, which leads to his inadequacy as an effective leader. At the same time, his physical nature seems to be illusory and even absent. Is this because he is not his own man, but is instead an emulation of Napoleon I, albeit unsuccessfully? Maurice wonders about the emperor’s health, whether ‘un état physiologique spécial, aggravé par la souffrance [...] n’était pas la cause de cette indécision [...]’. Cela aurait tout expliqué. Un gravier dans la chair d’un homme, et les empires s’écroulent’ (*RM*, V,

60 Émile Zola, ‘La Débâcle’, in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, ed. by Lanoux and Mitterand, V (1967), 408.

459). At one point, there is a rumour amongst the troops that the emperor ‘n’était plus là, qu’il avait fui, laissant en guise de mannequin, un de ses lieutenants, vêtu de son uniforme’ (*RM*, V, 562). The suggestion is that, the emperor, so in thrall to the Napoleonic myth, is not even Napoleon III. The word ‘mannequin’ corresponds with David Bell’s evaluation of Napoleon III being a ‘simulacrum of the Napoleonic myth’ (Bell, p. 5). The emperor is an elusive figure, and when he makes an appearance in the midst of battle in Sedan, he has

les moustaches si fortement cirées, les joues si colorées, qu’il [Delaherche] le jugea tout de suite rajeuni, fardé comme un acteur. Sûrement, il s’était fait peindre, pour ne promener, parmi son armée, l’effroi de son masque blême, décomposé par la souffrance [...], il était venu, de son air silencieux et morne de fantôme, aux chairs ravivées de vermillon. (*RM*, V, 579)

The immaterial nature of Napoleon III is even more pronounced when he is described as ‘ghostly’, made-up like an ‘actor’ so as to give him a semblance of being alive to detract from his deathly pallor.

In her consideration of the make-up worn by Napoleon III, Bernadette C. Lintz uncovers its different meanings which offer new perspectives on the degeneration of the beleaguered emperor and his regime. In defending his use of the make-up in his novel to indignant Bonapartists who believed that this had reduced the emperor ‘à un rôle louche d’histriion’ (*RM*, V, 1455), Lintz points out that Zola had declared that ‘[m]oi, je le trouve superbe, ce fard’.⁶¹ For Zola, the heightened colouring gave the emperor the melancholy and tragic air of a great Shakespearean hero (*RM*, V, 1455; p. 610).

Lintz identifies Zola’s use of this theatrical element of the make-up as a direct allusion to his literary hero and predecessor Victor Hugo. For Lintz, Zola’s intertextual references to Hugo’s work is deliberate and builds on his precursor’s fierce denouncements of Napoleon III and his regime. For example, Hugo had developed the concept of the emperor as an actor in his use of the word ‘histriion’ which occurs several times in the poetry collection *Les Châtiments*. In poems such as ‘A Juvénal’, where Hugo denounces the ‘talent’ of ‘l’histriion’, he condemns the inversion of values following the crime of the *coup d’état* which led to Louis-Napoleon becoming Napoleon III. Two lines of the poem underline the element of concealment that make-up affords and its subsequent immoral intent: ‘Par les juges lavé, par les filles fardé, | [...] |

⁶¹ Bernadette C. Lintz, ‘L’Empereur fardé: Napoléon III des *Châtiments* à *La Débâcle*’, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 35 (2007), 610–27 (p. 611).

Le mal prend tout à coup la figure du bien.’ Hugo also uses the term ‘histrion du crime’ in his reference to the massacres of the *coup d’état* by the rue Montmartre, which saw the fiercest fighting in Paris on the Bloody Thursday of 4 December 1851.

It is through disguise, make-up, and the playing of roles that Napoleon III, according to Lintz, seeks to eliminate the traces of ‘le crime fondateur’ and to master the political scene through ‘trompe-l’œil’ in his manipulation of signs (p. 611). In Zola’s novel, concerning the young Rose’s glimpse of the emperor’s personal grooming and her observation that there were ‘toutes sortes d’histoires sur la figure’ (*RM*, V, 609), Lintz regards the make-up as a palimpsest with its metaphorical emphasis on writing (pp. 616–17). Of course, it is the palimpsest’s effacement of one set of writing with the overlay of another which is the key to understanding the concealing nature of Napoleon III’s make-up: the overlay is not entirely successful because there are still traces of the overwritten script.

Lintz interprets Rose’s confiding to Henriette about Napoleon’s ill health as an ‘activité herméneutique’, this ‘maladie affreuse qui le force à crier’ (*RM*, V, 608) and which keeps him in the bathroom of the *sous-préfecture* in Sedan. The fact that Rose does not name the illness out of politeness allows for a ‘flou herméneutique’, a looseness which allows ‘se glisser les histoires générées par le fard’. The bathroom in the *sous-préfecture* is, for Lintz, a symbolically theatrical space as it is the place where the emperor ‘se décompose, se vide, [et] se liquéfie’, all of which operates symbolically as the ‘liquidation’ of a regime about to dissolve in its own corruption. It is also the place where the make-up is put on in an attempt to mask the corruption of Napoleon III’s body, preparing the imperial actor for his last scene (p. 617).

Hugo also uses ‘figures du sang, du borbier, du cloaque, de la fange, de l’ordure et du fumier’ in *Les Châtiments* (p. 618), particularly in the poem ‘Chanson’ where Hugo foretells the fate of Napoleon III: ‘Toi, tu te noieras dans la fange, | Petit, petit’ (p. 625, n. 14). In her reading of Hugo’s poem ‘L’Expiation’, Lintz sees the muck become a metaphorical and immoral concept as the ‘fumier’ sticks to the body and becomes contagious, and then transforms into an instrument of divine punishment (p. 618). By usurping his illustrious uncle’s name, Napoleon III has contaminated the First Empire’s glory by covering it in filth, a process which Lintz terms ‘la métonymie originaire’. This instrument of expiation then becomes a collective expiation as the emperor’s contamination spreads to the battlefield, poisoning it and setting into motion a state of decline in ‘une métonymie effrénée’ (p. 619).

Napoleon III's unseating as commander-in-chief of the army renders him powerless, 'une ombre d'empereur, indéfinie et vague' (*RM*, V, 444). In keeping the Napoleonic line intact for her husband and son, the Empress is determined that the nation is taken 'à l'extermination' so that the people 'pardonne à ta descendance' (*RM*, V, 498). Maurice believes the nation to be walking to a state of 'malheur', in 'la nuit du crime, la nuit abominable d'un assassinat de nation' (*RM*, V, 498). The political intrigue of the Empress becomes a moral problem, and perhaps one of evil. Maurice witnesses 'cette armée en perdition, qu'on envoyait à un écrasement certain, pour le salut d'une dynastie!' (*RM*, V, 503). Not only does he believe that France will be crushed as a nation, but the defeat is also framed in terms of morality whereby the army will be 'damned' for the sake of the 'salvation' of the Napoleonic dynasty.

The figure of Napoleon III embodies sickness in the novel. We are told that he is suffering from dysentery (*RM*, V, 550). His sickness is so acute that it seems that he is barely alive. At one point, he is described as 'une apparition de face cadavéreuse, les yeux éteints, les traits décomposés' (*RM*, V, 563). Yet, paradoxically, the emperor's body may have lost all physical integrity when he steps onto the battlefield and cannot even be shot because he is 'comme un spectre' (*RM*, V, 580). The degeneration is expressed in Napoleon III's body as dysentery, a condition which is infectious. It is from Napoleon III's body, the political body, that degeneration or *fêlure* spreads to the rest of Second Empire society. In the context of the Franco-Prussian conflict, it is his infection of the French army which is responsible for 'la vision des cadavres sanglants que ses fautes avaient couchés là-bas, par milliers' (*RM*, V, 668). Napoleon III's entourage also behaves in a 'decadent' way, raiding and looting ordinary people's homes to organise banquets. This undisciplined behaviour contrasts with that of the German army. When Maurice visits Mme Desroches in the village where he grew up, he finds that Napoleon III had requisitioned her house. She tells Maurice how badly the emperor and his soldiers behaved: 'Je la lui aurais donnée bien volontiers, ma maison, à l'empereur; mais il a, avec lui, des gens trop mal élevés! Si vous saviez comme ils ont tout pris, et ils vont tout brûler, tant ils font du feu!' (*RM*, V, 495).

The dual nature of Napoleon III's sickness — as contagious illness and malevolent corruption — is akin to a specific form of illness that is experienced by traditional tribes, described by Elias Canetti. These tribes believe that physical illness can be a sign of malediction, and is, in fact, a grudge from the dead towards the living.⁶²

62 Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. by Carol Stewart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux,

This illness, simultaneously a curse, causes material harm within the body. As with Napoleon III's sickness, it combines the elements of the natural, evil, and the moral. This is a catastrophe for France as a nation because Napoleon III's body is also the political body. It means that the sickness that he experiences becomes the degenerative decline of the French nation.

This fusion of the naturalistic and the moral is asserted by Zola in his equivalence of degeneration and sin:

L'armée de la désespérance, le troupeau expiatoire, envoyé en holocauste, avait payé les fautes de tous du flot rouge de son sang, à chacune de ses stations. Et, maintenant, égorgée sans gloire, couverte de crachats, elle tombait au martyre, sous ce châtement qu'elle n'avait pas mérité si rude. (*RM*, V, 774)

The bloodletting of the conflict is ironically compared to the sacrifice of Christ, 'paying for everyone's sins with their blood'. While Christ had died to save humankind, the tragedy of the French army is that many soldiers died to 'save' Napoleon III and his hereditary line. Zola has underlined the corruption of the Second Empire by drawing attention to the regime's debasing of morality for political aims. This vocabulary of expiation and regeneration is also present in the concluding chapters on the Paris Commune. This later inclusion of the notion of sin and redemption is a more positive exposition of what the loss of so much blood both in the war and in the Commune means for France. The later chapters show that sacrifices have been made in the lives which have been lost in battle, but this bloodletting is necessary to expiate the sin of Second Empire degeneration.

The Bonapartist Maurice believes that Napoleon III is on the side of the people when he feels 'tendre pour la personne de l'empereur, il était pour la guerre, la vie même des peuples' (*RM*, V, 440). Zola, however, makes clear the moral gravity of Napoleon III's taking of men to war, badly prepared: 'Encore du sang, encore des vies humaines fauchées par sa faute!' (*RM*, V, 683). It is not so much the disorganisation of the French army which Zola underlines, but the immoral intent, 'sa faute'. The futility is doubly amplified when the emperor is seen with his mournful face 'mal essuyée du fard du matin' (*RM*, V, 683). It is as though the reality of not being in the true Napoleonic mould finally shows itself with the slipping of the make-up. This is an artifice that contrasts with the vitality and authenticity of a healthy body.

1984), p. 265. Originally published in German as *Masse und Macht*, 1960.

Zola writes that the rot was present within the Second Empire before the conflict:

L'Empire vieilli [...] pourri à la base [...] prêt à crouler dès qu'il ne satisferait plus les appétits de jouissances déchaînés par lui; l'armée [...] gâtée par le remplacement à prix d'argent, laissée dans sa routine de l'école d'Afrique, trop certaine de la victoire pour tenter le grand effort de la science nouvelle. (*RM*, V, 413)

The excesses enjoyed by the Second Empire created a 'rotten base' to the society, and this transmitted itself to the army which was 'ruined' by money and complacency. There is also the suggestion that the French army is in this situation because its complacency prevents it from learning 'new science'. In Nordau's terms, this means that the lack of progress through science and knowledge is tantamount to regression.

In contrast, Prussia and its army are described as dynamic. They are 'tout ce vaste empire en formation, rajeuni, ayant l'enthousiasme et l'irrésistible élan de son unité à conquérir; [...] instruite, disciplinée [...]; l'intelligence, la force morale de cette armée, commandée par des chefs presque tous jeunes (*RM*, V, 413). The Prussians are 'youthful', and have 'discipline', 'instruction' and 'intelligence'. These are qualities prized by Nordau in the advancement of mankind, qualities which are noticeably absent on the French side.

Zola goes further in describing the rational nature of the Prussians, which would ensure perpetual rejuvenation in Nordau's terms: 'la marche mathématique, inexorable de ses armées [...] la machine à broyer', and their General de Moltke has 'sa face glabre de chimiste mathématicien'. Their innate qualities are of a naturally scientific bent, being 'mathematical' and logical, so it can only be expected that they are the superior nation compared to France (*RM*, V, 623, 713).

While the Prussians are advancing, in the sense of a physical attack of the French in the war and also as an evolving race in Nordau's terms, the French are going backwards. At one point in the novel, the troops have discovered that they have unwittingly gone 'en sens inverse le chemin déjà fait la veille' (*RM*, V, 423) through lack of planning. Not only is this a literal lack of progression in their war campaign, but, if this is viewed through Nordau's eyes, he would see the French as a regressing nation because they are subject to a degenerate decline. France's degeneracy, and, thus, lack of forward progress, is as much literal as moral.

Maurice, who started off believing that France would beat Prussia in the conflict, sees France's downfall in terms of the theory of degeneration. After the defeat at Sedan, he is totally dispirited:

Vaincu à Sedan, dans une catastrophe qu'il devinait immense, finissant un monde; et cette dégénérescence de la race, qui expliquait comment la France victorieuse avec les grands-pères avait pu être battue dans les petits-fils [...], telle qu'une maladie de famille, lentement aggravée, aboutissant à la destruction fatale [...]. Il n'y avait plus rien, la France était morte. (*RM*, V, 715)

For Maurice, the French defeat at Sedan means more than a loss of national pride. It is the obliteration of the French as a nation, the 'end of a world' brought on by the 'degenerescence of the race'. Maurice is expressing the defeat within the terms of Nordau's degeneration theory, whereby the sickness is physiological and terminal. It is compared to a family sickness, and this is reminiscent of Zola's *fêlure*, another form of degeneration.

The degenerate bourgeoisie

Moving from the degeneration at a national level, within the figure of Napoleon III and the French army, three characters in *La Débâcle* exemplify how the sickness affects the ordinary French citizen: the bourgeois Maurice, his twin sister Henriette, and the peasant labourer Jean. As a member of the degenerate bourgeoisie, Zola depicts Maurice as anxious, undisciplined, and even effeminate. In contrast, his twin sister Henriette displays great courage in her desire to find her missing husband Weiss. As a woman, her bravery overshadows that of her brother, as she braves enemy fire and displays masculine characteristics which Maurice does not possess. The third character, Jean, is sturdy and controlled, and of peasant stock, taking his responsibilities seriously as an army corporal in looking after his men, one of whom is Maurice.

The courage displayed by Henriette in the search for her husband belies what might be expected of her as a female figure. She wakes in the night, and the sounds of war are around her: 'des rumeurs extraordinaires la faisaient tressaillir, le piétinement d'un peuple en marche, des souffles de bêtes, des chocs d'armes, toute une chevauchée au fond de ces ténèbres d'enfer' (*RM*, V, 605). It is a truly hellish situation in which she finds herself.

Despite this, her desire to find her husband is still great. Zola describes her going outside as 'naturelle, sans héroïsme déplacé, rentrant dans son rôle de femme active, faisant en silence ce que nécessitait la bonne tenue de son ménage. Où son mari était,

elle devait être, simplement' (*RM*, V, 610). Going into the dark of night, through countryside where war is raging, does not make her a 'heroine'; it is simply her wifely duty to do so. Henriette meets Delaherche en route, and the latter feels 'un combat intérieur fort désagréable, partagé entre son devoir d'homme brave qui lui commandait de ne pas quitter Henriette, et sa terreur de refaire le chemin de Bazeilles sous les obus' (*RM*, V, 620). It should be noted that Henriette's courage is 'natural', whereas Delaherche has a 'duty' to be brave. He is certainly not feeling brave, but feels 'terror' in returning to Bazeilles. At one point, a bullet grazes her over the left eyebrow, but she continues her way 'parmi les balles avec une insouciance de créature dégagée d'elle-même, qui ne raisonne plus, qui donne sa vie [...] vingt fois elle manqua d'être tuée, sans paraître le savoir' (*RM*, V, 631). The strength of character of Henriette, who is full of vital energy, is in direct contrast to her brother Maurice, who appears to epitomise the 'effeminate' intellectual decadent so criticised by Nordau.

On the question of gender, Nordau believes that degeneration has created perceptible changes in society:

Sexual psychopathy of every nature has become so general and so imperious that manners and laws have adapted themselves accordingly. They appear already in the fashions. Masochists or passivists, who form the majority of men, clothe themselves in a costume which recalls, by colour and cut, feminine apparel. Women who wish to please men of this kind wear men's dress, an eyeglass, boots with spurs and riding-whip, and only show themselves in the street with a large cigar in their mouths. (pp. 538–39)

In the same way that Nordau perceives degeneration to have a cognitive root, the apparent switching of genders in society similarly results from mental imbalance. The definition of a 'psychopath' is a person suffering from a chronic mental disorder which results in abnormal social behaviour. The 'sexual psychopathy' to which Nordau refers may then be explained as the corruption of gender, which is a social phenomenon.

The inner strength displayed by Henriette is shared by Jean, whose peasant background ensures that he is not tainted by the bourgeois degeneration. Jean is Maurice's army senior and, time and time again, he acts authoritatively and kindly towards his men, particularly to the despairing Maurice who comes to rely on him.

At the beginning of the novel, Maurice typically regards Jean as someone from a lower class, despite Jean being his army senior. When a woman villager berates and mocks the soldiers because she thinks they do not know the way to the Rhine, Maurice is surprised to see the tears in Jean's eyes: 'Il en eut un saisissement, son malheur en fut accru, à l'idée que les brutes avaient elles-mêmes senti l'injure, qu'on ne méritait pas et

qu'il fallait subir' (*RM*, V, 434). The 'brute' surprises Maurice again, when Jean attempts to raise his spirits:

Allez, nous ne sommes pas encore battus, c'est nous qui finirons bien par les rosser un jour, les Prussiens! A cette minute, Maurice sentit un chaud rayon de soleil lui couler jusqu'au cœur. Il restait troublé, humilié. Quoi? cet homme n'était donc pas qu'un rustre? (*RM*, V, 440)

Jean also shows paternal kindness to Maurice when he suffers a leg injury and can barely walk. Later in the novel, Jean represents law and order as he chooses to serve under Thiers's provisional government.

The quality of muddled, irrational thinking attributed to degenerates by Nordau is exemplified by the desperate Maurice when he recounts a plan to Jean for them both to escape their imprisonment by the Prussians. Despite also wanting to escape, Jean's mind was 'plus net et plus froid' [...] il le serrait contre lui, comme s'ils se fussent soutenus mutuellement, pendant qu'il continuait à le calmer, de son air bourru et tendre' (*RM*, V, 780). During the Commune, at the end of the novel, Maurice displays signs of confusion in the warlike environment.

As the novel progresses, Jean displays more clear-sightedness, while Maurice becomes overwhelmed with fear. In one of his sobbing crises after France is defeated, Maurice is described as having the 'faiblesse nerveuse de femme' (*RM*, V, 715). Yet, Jean believes that the new France can be built, with men who were

de bons bougres, travaillant dur, ne buvant pas ce qu'ils gagnaient [...]. Et [...] il se redressa, dans un besoin vivace de vivre, de reprendre l'outil ou la charrue, pour rebâtir la maison, selon sa parole. Il était du vieux sol obstiné et sage, du pays de la raison, du travail et de l'épargne. (*RM*, V, 716)

In this speech, Jean displays qualities absent from the decadent bourgeoisie: hard work, modest drinking, building with his hands, saving money. Most importantly, he represents the 'hardy need to live', and he hails from the 'country of reason': for these two qualities alone, he would constitute one of Nordau's elite.

v) Regeneration and redemption

After the Battle of Sedan in 1870, in which France was finally defeated by Prussia, the bloodletting of the war continued with the Commune in Paris. This was a civil war that lasted only ten weeks, and which ended in the Bloody Week of 21–28 May 1871. The Commune was led by left-wing militants who had wanted to set up self-government for Parisians, many of whom felt that they would then be masters of their own lives for the first time (Merriman, p. 2). Adolphe Thiers, however, the conservative head of a provisional government situated in Versailles, firmly opposed the Commune and its aims. It was Thiers's troops which gunned down thousands of men, women, and occasionally, children, during Bloody Week to bring an end to the Commune.

Zola's *La Débâcle* portrays the Commune as the necessary aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War because it is a continuation of the Second Empire's class conflict which had existed before the war. Within the terms of degenerative theory, the decadent bourgeoisie had weakened themselves and French society, and Zola shows that it was for this reason that the robust Prussians were able to conquer this nation in decline. With France at its lowest ebb after defeat, the nation and its leadership was in disarray. From this political disintegration, the creation of the Commune was an attempt by the Parisian working class to create a political framework in which their own concerns would be addressed, and many supporters of the Commune also thought that only a republic could save France.

The period after the Franco-Prussian War leading up to the Commune was, then, a time of potential regeneration. It was necessary for the nation to rebuild itself from the ashes of a destructive war, its sociopolitical infrastructure lying in ruins. Zola makes this clear in *La Débâcle*, but he also emphasises the redemption that will come from this rebuilding. This interim period is an opportunity to restore the nation to health after its moral and physical decline under the degenerative Second Empire of Napoleon III. Zola's novel shows how the bloodletting of the war must continue in the Commune to expiate the degenerative sins of the nation. Zola's use of religious allusions and blood imagery is extensive, and emphasises the notion that the body is a site of morality. As the body, for Zola, variously and simultaneously signifies the political, national, and human body, then morality must affect all three. The Commune's hope is for 'la vieille société [être] détruite, de Paris brûlé, du champ retourné et purifié, pour qu'il y poussât l'idylle d'un nouvel âge d'or' (*RM*, V, 911). The destruction of the 'old society' through

fire is a process of purification for France, which would herald a ‘new golden age’. While no society would be perfect, as the word ‘idyll’ might signify, it would at least be free of the degeneration which ruined the Second Empire.

In Christophe Reffait’s discussion of national regeneration in *La Débâcle*, he argues that the novel shows Zola to be a strong patriot despite contemporary accusations to the contrary. By showing the ‘mort de la nation’ exemplified by the Paris Commune in his novel, published twenty years after the event, Zola is engaging with the founding myths of the Third Republic because he is also necessarily asking questions about ‘la renaissance’. The task of rebuilding France was part of the Republican rhetoric in the 1870s and, in his speech of 26 June 1871, Gambetta conceived this in physiological terms when he declared that ‘[i]l s’agit de refaire le sang, les os, la moelle de la France’.⁶³ Reffait notes that Zola uses metaphors of rebirth in both his journalism and *La Débâcle*, and they are organised around the regenerative ideas of fire and bleeding. These metaphors occur especially in the novel’s depiction of the *semaine sanglante*, when Maurice witnesses the defeat of the Commune. Two other related motifs that Zola uses is that of the harvest and germination, whether describing the mobilisation of citizens or the resurrection of dead soldiers rising from the ground in a *Figaro* article when he visited a battleground (p. 44).

The metaphor of rebirth from the ground is encapsulated by the theme of the peasant and, according to Reffait, Zola drew from the myth of the ‘Soldat-laboureur’ which entered French literature from vaudeville in the 1820s (pp. 45, 46). This mythical figure had been deployed by the Legitimists in 1820, in 1848, and again by Gambetta in 1870, according to whom the Republic is ‘une République de paysans’. Reffait notes that the figure of the ‘Soldat-laboureur’ is inseparable from that of the Napoleonic veteran Nicolas Chauvin who was known for his extreme patriotic views. In the *Ébauche* to *La Débâcle* (fols 2–6, in *RM*, V, 1376), Zola denounced the rhetoric which ‘faisait de nous les troupiers vainqueurs du monde’ and believed that this thinking, incarnated by the character lieutenant Rochas, had led to the defeat of 1870. For Reffait, the corporal peasant Jean and lieutenant Rochas in *La Débâcle* offered the two faces of the same national myth (p. 46).

Zola’s metaphor of ‘la saignée régénératrice’ in the novel was originally used in his articles in May 1871 when he wrote about the repression of the Commune, and this

⁶³ Christophe Reffait, ‘La Renaissance de la nation selon *La Débâcle* d’Émile Zola’, *Dix-Neuf*, 6 (2006), 42–54 (p. 43).

becomes the symbol of amputation in the novel (p. 47). For Reffait, the removal of the gangrenous limb takes on a metaphorical sense in *La Débâcle*. Consequently, Zola shows the corruption of the Second Empire in the 'pourriture' of the Commune. Although Maurice is 'la chair de la chair de Jean', he is the rotten part ready for amputation. Reffait reminds us that the metaphor of amputation was introduced into Republican discourse with reference to the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine, and Gambetta spoke of 'mutilation' in his speeches (p. 48). The two allusions to the conditions of the armistice in the novel are, for Reffait, as if Zola had submitted to Gambetta's pronouncement on the lost territory, that is to 'y penser toujours, n'en parler jamais' (p. 49). Reffait applies this idea of amputation to the structure of the novel itself when he compares the two chapters on the Commune 'qu'on nous prie de ne pas voir' to an amputated limb, or 'plutôt à la trace de cette amputation'. Reffait considers the novel to be turned towards a regenerated future, so it is then 'un roman ouvert quoique cousu' (p. 50).

If Zola shows that it was the corrupt Second Empire and its bourgeoisie that had degraded the nation, then the question of which political group should restore the nation was crucial. Adolphe Thiers and the National Assembly were ready to reinstate a monarchy, but Parisian republicans, supported by potentially revolutionary National Guard units, were unwilling to accept this (Merriman, p. 38). The struggle of the Commune was thus directed against the repressive political forces that were in power before the war.

Zola depicts this struggle to fuel revolution within the figure of the bourgeois Maurice. During the war, he had exhibited symptoms of degeneration, but these worsen dramatically during the Commune when he is overwhelmed by feelings of despair about the state of the nation. His deterioration is so extreme, having lost all sense of reason, that he embodies Nordau's notion of *fin-de-race*. The bourgeois Maurice, as the embodiment of Second Empire decadence, deteriorates as his mental faculties fail him. His excessively emotional state renders him the exemplar of Nordau's definition of the degenerate, no longer able to play a productive part in an ever-progressing civilisation because he has lost the ability to reason. The Commune's destruction of Paris similarly parallels the sense of the end of civilisation in Nordau's definition.

The inhabitants of Paris similarly feel desperate. The siege by the Prussians after Napoleon III's surrender creates a sense of anger within the city. Maurice, newly arrived in Paris, writes to his sister of Parisians wanting revenge, 'retombant dans des illusions

nouvelles, la légende victorieuse de l'armée' (*RM*, V, 800). The people are clearly trying to evoke the glory days of Napoleon Bonaparte, a leader whom they would like to think would have been able to fight off the Prussians. Zola, however, makes it plain that such a thought is futile and a mere fantasy because it is an 'illusion'. More interestingly, Maurice writes of 'des hécatombes de Prussiens' (*RM*, V, 800), which speaks of not just overcoming the enemy, but of a deeper, cultural need to totally obliterate its aggressors. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a hecatomb as 'a great public sacrifice of a hundred oxen among the ancient Greeks and Romans, and extended to the religious sacrifices of other nations'. As it was a public spectacle, it was a matter of importance to the entire community. It was also a ritual slaughter, which serves as a visceral analogy of how the besieged French would like to avenge their enemy. The ritual sacrifice also demonstrates religious thinking, which suggests the need for purification. The hatred of the French nation for the Prussians is, then, a matter of the body as well as of nationhood and purity through religious practices.

Two days after Napoleon III's defeat at Sedan, his Second Empire collapsed and the Third Republic was established. Zola writes that, the day before the transfer of regime, there were cries in the street of 'Déchéance! déchéance!' (*RM*, V, 800) from Parisians. These shouts, signifying 'degeneration' or 'decay', are as if ordinary people are conscious of the degenerate nature of the Empire and want to see its downfall. Zola writes that 'c'était le 4 septembre, l'effondrement d'un monde, le second Empire emporté dans la débâcle de ses vices et de ses fautes' (*RM*, V, 801). With the fall of the Empire, its 'vice and sins' are swept away. Zola is clear to emphasise the idea of collapse with the words 'l'effondrement' and 'la débâcle'. The collapse 'of a world' is also the passing away of what Napoleon III would have termed 'civilisation', as his regime had modernised medieval Paris through extensive rebuilding in the Haussmannisation project. This 'civilisation', however, was made corrupt by the bourgeoisie's immoral behaviour. Zola's use of 'la débâcle' to describe the sweeping away of corruption reminds the reader of the very title of his novel. In addition to its meaning of 'collapse' and 'breaking up', it also means 'rout', as in the disorderly retreat of defeated troops. Zola, then, fuses the ideas of moral, physical, and societal collapse, which are all the results of degeneration and are directly linked to the Second Empire.

According to the terms of Nordau's degenerative theory, this collapse of the French nation and its civilisation means that the French are no longer governed by reason. The besieged city of Paris is encircled by the enemy Prussians, and this makes

the Parisians even more unstable. Zola writes that ‘c’était déjà une crise de nervosité malade qui se déclarait, une épidémique fièvre exagérant la peur comme la confiance, lâchant la bête humaine débridée, au moindre souffle’ (*RM*, V, 859). The Parisians are unbalanced to the point of illness, and it can even be described as a form of hysteria which was a recognised mental disorder in the nineteenth century. This illness becomes a ‘feverish epidemic’ which physically infects the population. The degeneration of the rational human becomes so extreme that the fever unleashes ‘the unbridled human beast’, so that the human is no more than an instinctual animal. Hysteria will be discussed in chapter 3, on women, where the illness is similarly depicted as an infection which reduces the human to mere instinct, but it is within the commercialised environment of Haussmann’s Paris.

The bourgeois Maurice despairs of the fate of France as he himself falls deeper into a degenerate state:

Il saignait de Sedan, ainsi que d’une plaie vive, toujours irritée, que le moindre revers suffisait à rouvrir; il gardait l’ébranlement de chacune des défaites, le corps appauvri, la tête affaiblie par une si longue suite de jours sans pain, de nuits sans sommeil [...]; et l’idée que tant de souffrances aboutiraient à une catastrophe nouvelle, irrémédiable, l’affolait, faisait de ce lettré un être d’instinct, retourné à l’enfance, sans cesse emporté par l’émotion du moment. Tout, la destruction, l’extermination plutôt que de donner un sou de la fortune, un pouce du territoire de la France! En lui, s’achevait l’évolution qui, sous le coup des premières batailles perdues, avait détruit la légende napoléonienne, le bonapartisme sentimental qu’il devait aux récits épiques de son grand-père. Déjà même, il n’en était plus à la république théorique et sage, il versait dans les violences révolutionnaires, croyait à la nécessité de la terreur, pour balayer les incapables et les traîtres, en train d’égorger la patrie. (*RM*, V, 860)

Zola makes clear the physical and metonymic link between the French national, political, and human body. The blood that was shed in the Battle of Sedan appears in Maurice as a wound that never heals. This weakening of his body, along with the days without bread and sleepless nights, combine to make this ‘well-read person [a] creature of instinct’, so he has literally degenerated in Nordau’s terms. In anticipation of the announcement of the armistice which imposed harsh terms on France, Maurice would rather pursue ‘destruction [and] extermination’ than give any money or land to Prussia. This tips him into ‘revolutionary violence’, which is one step beyond aiming for the political solution of a ‘sensible Republic’. Allowing an armistice to go through would make ‘traitors’ of the Government of National Defence who authorises it, and it is

another means of 'bleeding white' the nation. This drawing of more blood from the country would be enough to kill France. In Maurice's mind, the situation has rendered a complete abasement of the Napoleonic legend which he now accepts to be an 'epic story'. Napoleon III cannot now claim to be a worthy inheritor of the grand Napoleonic myth. He is, instead, a degraded version of his uncle.

Yet, for all his revolutionary zeal, Maurice is not merely pursuing mindless violence. Although he is losing his ability to think rationally, he still retains a moral compass. Zola writes that Maurice's mind was haunted by violence and that he was ready to commit desperate acts, but it was 'pour la défense de ce qu'il croyait être la vérité et la justice. Et [...] il se disait qu'on pouvait sauver la France, sauver la République' (*RM*, V, 868). Even in these times of degeneration, Maurice still wants to save his country, and the only way to do this is to create a republic. This new political understanding is radical for the previously bourgeois Maurice who had been a supporter of Napoleon III.

This sense of morality is not a quality which the French conservative administration shares. The besieged Paris is surrounded by Prussians, but it also has another enemy in the provisional government in Versailles, which has been ousted from the city by the Commune. The newspaper *Le Rappel* on 8 February 1871 commented: 'It is no longer an army you are facing... it is no longer Germany... It is more. It is monarchy, it is despotism'. The corrupted bourgeoisie would like to re-gain power in Paris, but, as Zola shows in his novel, it is the bourgeoisie who had left France in its degenerated state, so re-gaining the leadership would be harmful for the nation. Despite this, Thiers and the National Assembly were readying for a war that they understood as 'a class war' between the bourgeoisie and Parisian workers (Merriman, pp. 33, 50).

Thiers's administration orders an attack on Paris:

Maurice, échappé à la tuéie, tout frémissant de s'être battu, n'avait plus eu que de la haine contre ce prétendu gouvernement d'ordre et de légalité, qui, écrasé à chaque rencontre par les Prussiens, retrouvait seulement du courage pour vaincre Paris. Et les armées allemandes étaient encore là, de Saint-Denis à Charenton, assistant à ce beau spectacle de l'effondrement d'un peuple! (*RM*, V, 873)

Thiers's National Assembly may be a symbol of civilisation and social order, but this has no validity in Maurice's eyes if they are attacking their fellow French citizens. This appalling sight is being witnessed by the Prussians surrounding the city, and it could only substantiate their view that the French nation is one of irrational degenerates.

The Prussian point of view is made clear from the meeting between the German Otto Gunther and Maurice's sister Henriette. The Prussians view France as not just degenerate, but also wicked:

Son geste avait suffi, il avait dit sa haine de race, sa conviction d'être en France le justicier, envoyé par le Dieu des armées pour châtier un peuple pervers. Paris brûlait en punition de ses siècles de vie mauvaise, du long amas de ses crimes et de ses débauches. De nouveau, les Germains sauveraient le monde, balayeraient les dernières poussières de la corruption latine. (*RM*, V, 887)

The Germans have taken the role of saviour of the world, sent by God to punish a perverse Paris. The ascendant nation of Prussia is trying to chastise a degenerate France, but this punishment is also expressed in Christian terms of salvation. The degeneration of France is thus a moral calamity for the nation, and not just a political and national disaster.

The National Assembly's attack on Paris leaves Maurice so angry that he loses all reason. He shares the view of the Prussians that this could only be the product of profound wickedness. It is then that Maurice turns to the Commune as a vigorous political force:

La Commune lui apparaissait comme une vengeresse des hontes endurées, comme une libératrice apportant le fer qui ampute, le feu qui purifie [...]. Si Paris l'emportait, il le voyait, dans une gloire, reconstituant une France de justice et de liberté, réorganisant une société nouvelle, après avoir balayé les débris pourris de l'ancienne [...]. Mais, le jour où la Commune fut solennellement constituée, sur la place de l'Hôtel-de-Ville, pendant que le canon tonnait et que les trophées de drapeaux rouges claquaient au vent, il avait voulu tout oublier, soulevé de nouveau par un espoir sans bornes. Et l'illusion recommençait, dans la crise aiguë du mal à son paroxysme, au milieu des mensonges des uns et de la foi exaltée des autres. (*RM*, V, 874)

Maurice sees the Commune as a regenerating force, restoring France to its former health before degeneration set in. This renewing energy has mythical status as it is 'the fire which purifies'. He envisages a glorious France 'of justice and liberty', and this new nation will have swept away the rotten debris of the old one. Regeneration will have replaced the degeneration which destroyed France. Maurice feels 'boundless hope', but Zola, crucially, considers this to be an 'illusion'.

The Commune's aims are on a par with those of the 1789 Revolution when the French aristocracy was overthrown in favour of a republic which promoted equality. If a republic is to exist after the Second Empire, then Adolphe Thiers and his administration

must be removed from power because they were a group mostly composed of conservatives and monarchists (Merriman, p. 38). The objective of the Commune was, then, to remove Thiers from office and to establish a republic. In his account of the French revolutionary programme of 1789, Jesse Goldhammer describes it as daunting as the revolutionaries had to desacralise a king and to transfer his sacred power to the people.⁶⁴ Although there was no figure comparable to Louis XVI for the Communards, who had derived his power from God, they had still wanted the same thing: the transference of sacred authority from the royal body to the many republican ones (Goldhammer, p. 60). The revolutionaries had embraced Machiavellian assumptions concerning sacrifice and power, which were that all political authority has a sacred quality, and any changes to the authoritative status of the power must also have a sacred character or origin (Goldhammer, p. 7). With the elimination of Louis XVI's corpus, or Thiers's conservative-monarchist administration for the Communards, new 'cleansed' republican bodies would emerge (Goldhammer, p. 60). It is this purified political force that the Commune represents which so appeals to Maurice in Zola's novel. If a republic is established, then it would mean a healthy nation free from the degeneration of the Second Empire.

After the attack by the Versaillais, the Commune would rather burn down Paris than cede the city to Thiers. One particular landmark which was pulled down was the Vendôme column. In 1863, Napoleon III had dressed his uncle in Roman attire at the top of the column (Merriman, p. 132), so it was a symbolic demolition of the Napoleonic empire by the Communards.

At first, Maurice feels some anguish at the pulling-down of this structure, but he realises that France could never fully regenerate otherwise:

Que Paris s'effondrât, qu'il brûlât comme un immense bûcher d'holocauste, plutôt que d'être rendu à ses vices et à ses misères, à cette vieille société gâtée d'abominable injustice! Et il faisait un autre grand rêve noir, la ville géante en cendre, plus rien que des tisons fumants sur les deux rives, la plaie guérie par le feu, une catastrophe sans nom, sans exemple, d'où sortirait un peuple nouveau. (*RM*, V, 875)

After the destruction, a 'new people' would emerge from 'this ruined, old society', a society which is presently unjust. There is, however, a mythical justification for the devastation by the Commune. The 'holocaust' is not only a reference to the fires lit by

⁶⁴ Jesse Goldhammer, *The Headless Republic: Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 7.

the Communards, but it is also a symbol of atonement, as 'holocaust' is also a Jewish sacrificial offering that is burned completely on an altar. The ruined city is, therefore, not only a prelude to a new political order, but it is also a desire to bring in a morally regenerated nation. The expiatory nature of the fires is made clear when Zola describes the 'wound [being] cured by the fire'.

Not surprisingly, Thiers and his administration were horrified by the destruction of Paris by the Communards. Thiers proclaimed that 'We are *honnête gens*', which meant that they were men of property (Merriman, p. 160). From their point of view, the Communards were destroying their financial investments, and, ironically, believed that society was degenerating because the lower orders were causing mayhem. The newspaper *Le Figaro* demanded a complete purge: 'Never has such an opportunity presented itself to cure Paris of the moral gangrene which has eaten away at it for the last twenty years... Today clemency would be completely crazy... Let's go, *honnête gens*! Help us finish with the democratic and socialist vermin' (Merriman, p. 238).

It is clear that the notions of society and morality are completely different for the bourgeoisie and the Communards. While the bourgeoisie believe that society and progress should come together for materialistic gain, the Communards are concerned about the inevitable injustices and morality of such a society. This conservative ideology was later upheld in the official government inquest into the Commune, which predictably blamed socialists and anarchists for the 'moral disorder' of the Commune. It saluted the repression as 'a painful necessity [but] society is obliged to defend itself'. It also considered that France had to 'again rejoin the path of civilisation'. Additionally, the elimination of the 'unhealthy' parts of society played an important role in this effort, so a massacre was a good start. This Versaillais interpretation, justifying the bloody repression, remained dominant through the time of the 'Republic of Moral Order', which lasted until 1877 (Merriman, p. 248).

The peasant figure Jean in Zola's novel feels the same abhorrence of the destruction wreaked by the Communards. He is not tainted by degeneration because he has a peasant background, so he is untouched by this bourgeois sickness. Yet, he is angered by the damage as it offends his respect for property and his need for order. Jean believes that 'il n'y avait que des bandits capables d'un coup pareil' (*RM*, V, 883).

Maurice argues with Jean when the former delights in the fires engulfing Paris around them as they attempt to navigate down the Seine to safety. It is a truly hellish scene as buildings are burning down on both sides of them. It is described as 'un abîme

noir [...] une énormité ténébreuse, un néant' (*RM*, V, 894). Paris has become the burning pit of hell, atoning for its sins. The flames reach such a height that they extinguish the stars. Their boat passes the royal residence of the Tuileries Palace, and Maurice feverishly imagines dancing ladies behind the blazingly lit windows. The light is, of course, provided by the fires engulfing Paris. Playing out his imagination, Maurice 'évoquait les galas de Gomorrhe et de Sodome' (*RM*, V, 894). Zola's Christian allusion adds a moral meaning to the scene. According to the biblical story of Genesis, the two towns of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire from Heaven because of the wickedness of their inhabitants. Jean berates Maurice for enjoying the spectacle: 'Non, non! il ne fallait point vouloir le mal!' (*RM*, V, 894). The irony is that Jean is unaware that the fires are purifying the evil of degeneration that Paris represents. Maurice is suffering delirium and, in Nordau's terms, has now become an illogical degenerate. In Nordau's own words, he is exhibiting the signs of the degenerate's 'shattered brain' (Introduction, *Degeneration*, p. vi). Despite this apparent cognitive impairment, Maurice is, nevertheless, still aware of the moral importance of the fires destroying Paris because they will eradicate the degeneration that gripped the city.

Maurice has the same argument with his sister Henriette. While she hates the war for bringing destruction into Paris, Maurice believes that it is a good thing. He says, 'Non, non, ne maudis pas la guerre... Elle est bonne, elle fait son œuvre [...]. C'est peut-être nécessaire, cette saignée' (*RM*, V, 903). The work that is needed is for the sickness of degeneration to be cured from the French national body. If it means that the country has to suffer huge casualties in the war, and that Paris is cleansed from sin through destruction of the city, then the nation would have to endure both in order to become morally healthy again.

It is therefore the strongest symbolism of the elimination of degeneration, through bloodletting, when Jean accidentally stabs Maurice. Although the latter is still morally conscious despite having lost his reason, his past bourgeois life in the Second Empire marks him out as a carrier of degeneration in the new republic. For the Third Republic to thrive, there can be no trace of the corruption that ruined the Second Empire.

Zola makes clear the close relationship between degeneration and illness, and health and sanity in the novel:

C'était la partie saine de la France, la raisonnable, la pondérée, la paysanne, celle qui était restée le plus près de la terre, qui supprimait la partie folle, exaspérée, gâtée par l'Empire, détraquée de rêveries et de jouissances; et il lui avait ainsi fallu couper dans sa chair même. (*RM*, V, 907)

The characters of Jean and Maurice embody health and sickness in their roles as peasant and bourgeois. But these characters also have a metonymic link to the national body of France, so Jean is 'the sane part', while Maurice is 'the mad part'. As health and sickness both have material value in the body of France, it is inevitable that the sick Maurice needs to be 'cut' from France. The dying Maurice, speaking to Jean, recognises that he was 'l'ulcère collé à tes os' (*RM*, V, 907).

France, as a country, thus had to suffer terrible bloodshed in the war to rid itself of degeneration:

Mais le bain de sang était nécessaire, et de sang français, l'abominable holocauste, le sacrifice vivant, au milieu du feu purificateur. Désormais, le calvaire était monté jusqu'à la plus terrifiante des agonies, la nation crucifiée expiait ses fautes et allait renaître. (*RM*, V, 907)

The sickness of degeneration will be lost in the spilling of blood during the war, but Zola's focus is on the regeneration of morality for France. He writes that the French bloodbath was 'necessary', but this carnage is recast as a 'living sacrifice within purifying fire'. The killings of French soldiers are an expiation of sin. Zola uses the Christian image of rebirth after crucifixion. It is a harrowing death, but the familiarity of this biblical story, whereby Jesus returns to life, gives a sense of assurance from Zola that France will surely recover its health if corruption is eliminated.

The bright new dawn of France's future seems to have arrived when Maurice dies on the last day of the Commune. It is suitably symbolic that he should die on the last day of a period of bloodshed which foregrounds a new republic. The novel ends on an optimistic note, when the future beckons Jean 'marchant à l'avenir, à la grande et rude besogne de toute une France à refaire' (*RM*, V, 912). The work of the war and the Commune has eliminated the degeneration, and Jean's own work is to help shape a new France which is free of corruption. Jean's labours will build a new civilisation, and the progress that he will make will be different from the progress of the Second Empire which led to class conflict, social injustice, and repression.

Nordau's degenerative theory emphasised the importance of reason, restraint, and discipline. Without these qualities, progress would be undermined in society. The excessive immorality of Napoleon III's reign displayed none of these qualities, and, by considering Nordau's concept of *fin-de-race* in Zola's novel, it is possible to account for the catastrophic decline of France. The expiation of the evil of degeneration was only possible through the bloodletting of the Commune, in order that France's future could

be renewed. It is only through this expiation that national redemption is possible.

Chapter 2

The City

Chapter 1 presented the myth of degeneration essentially as a bodily concept. In this chapter the Second Empire's myth of eternal progress is made manifest as a spatial concept in the city of Paris, which is the locus of degeneration. The topography of Haussmann's rebuilt Paris has politicised urban space, so that the working classes and the poor are alienated and stigmatised within their own city. Zola's myth of the *fêlure* has become a spatial entity, a material pathway of sin running through the foundations of the city expressing the immoral nature of the Empire. The conceptual underground allocated for the non-bourgeois population is the space of the *fêlure*, and which is also a realisation of the Christian hell.

The city was transformed by Haussmann in the 1850s and 1860s in his massive rebuilding programme, which saw the medieval streets being swept away, and replaced by long, straight boulevards. This modernity was part of the drive of the bourgeoisie to make as much money as possible. Paris had been overtaken by the new economics, whereby commerce, high finance, and speculation ruled the city.

However, this new prosperity did not benefit the entire Parisian population, as the bulldozing of old Paris forced the lower classes to move to the peripheries of the city. This displacement of an entire social group was deliberate because they were not part of the economic boom, and were therefore considered not to be part of modernity. Napoleon III's notion of progress and the drive towards this goal were so extreme that the city of Paris became, I propose, a space of sinfulness and death in the bourgeoisie's repression of the lower classes. This progress should be regarded as a mythology of progress because it is the Second Empire regime's own creation myth. That is to say that it was necessary to create a 'universe' in which the ideology of progress was able to thrive. The city of Paris was thus reshaped, or indeed created anew, in order for the bourgeoisie to pursue its economic agenda without hindrance.

This is how Haussmann himself had explained his rebuilding project to the Paris municipal council:

En éventrant ces vieux pâtés de maisons, en démêlant à coups de pioche ces écheveaux de ruelles malsaines, en y faisant violemment entrer l'air et le soleil, on n'a pas seulement apporté la santé: on a moralisé ces quartiers misérables, car on a chassé les malfaiteurs que le grand jour épouvante et qui ne trouvent plus à se cacher dans les vastes espaces où

se dressaient autrefois leurs taudis lézardés.⁶⁵

For Haussmann, his demolition project entails the ‘bringing of health’ to streets which had hitherto been deprived of air and sun. However, his conception of progress is very much from a bourgeois viewpoint as he also believes that the rebuilding will ‘moralise’ these slum areas because the ‘lawbreakers’ will no longer have a place to hide in the newly opened spaces. Haussmann makes the bourgeois assumption that crime is perpetrated by the non-bourgeois, so progress necessarily involves the ordering of the lower classes as much as the physical rebuilding of Paris.

The chapter will discuss the Second Empire’s conception of progress, which was played out in terms of both time and space. The Haussmannian city, as a beacon of modernity, was, I propose, based on an ideology of eternal progress. This meant that the past, and even the idea of the past, had to be eradicated. The lower classes, who were not part of this progress, belonged to the past and were therefore not welcome in modern Paris. With regard to space, the rebuilding of the city and the development of its sewers created a literal and metaphorical ‘underground’ where those from the lower classes were relegated by the bourgeoisie. The division between the bourgeoisie and the lower classes then becomes a division of space along political lines within the city, with the lower classes being in the underground and the bourgeoisie residing within the overground.

The chapter will go on to examine the moral dimensions of this separation of the bourgeoisie and the lower classes within modern Paris. The two novels *L’Assommoir* and *Nana* illustrate the subjugation of Gervaise the laundress and Nana the prostitute respectively. The critic David Pike writes of the urban category of ‘underworld beings’,⁶⁶ and both characters belong to this underworld. It is a social designation which describes their ‘submerged’ status. Their repression is expressed in the novels in terms of space: for Gervaise, the expanse and type of space in which she lives and is allowed by the bourgeoisie decreases as she becomes destitute, while Nana — the prostitute figure akin to the Devil — is in a space that resembles the Christian hell. The suppression of Gervaise’s life may be viewed as a tragedy as her options are so limited from the start, but the suppression of Nana’s life becomes a tragedy for the whole of the French nation as the effects of her corruption physically fragments society.

65 Yves Lemoine, cited in Dominique Kalifa, *Crime et culture au XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 2005), p. 25.

66 David L. Pike, *Subterranean Cities: The World Beneath Paris and London, 1800–1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 1.

Pike's conceptual model of the 'underground' and the 'overground' is overlaid by the vertical cosmos of Christianity, where good was above, and evil below (Pike, p. 5). The two novels describe the experience of the Haussmannian city as one of morality, and the Christian concepts of 'good' and 'evil' applied to lower-class and bourgeois space is one expression of this. The interface between the underground and the overground — conceptual and physical — could be described as the *fêlure*, a term that Zola uses in his *Rougon-Macquart* novels to describe immorality and corruption. This crack running between the underground and the overground through the topography of modern Paris would then be comparable to the *fêlure* of natural evil or Christianity's original sin running through the fabric of the city, a testament to the sinful nature of Paris. The work of Deleuze will provide a secular description of natural evil in his writing about the *fêlure* in the preface to Zola's novel *La Bête humaine*. Although Deleuze specifically refers to that particular work, it is possible to extrapolate the concept to apply to *L'Assommoir* and *Nana* and, further, to the essence of Second Empire progress as Zola depicts it. The nature of the *fêlure*, at once spatial, metaphysical and mythological, is very apt in describing Haussmannian space which has been constructed by its own mythology of progress. Additionally, the work of Mircea Eliade, writing on the belief systems of traditional tribes, and Walter Benjamin, writing on the authenticity of old Paris and its inhabitants, will both be relevant in the critique of the Second Empire's notion of progress as ultimately unrealistic. Both these writers question the very idea of manipulating history and eradicating the past, and the Second Empire's attempt at doing so constitutes an immoral act.

i) The sinfulness of modernity in the Haussmannian city

The complete reconstruction of Paris by Haussmann was part of the drive towards progress, and I suggest that this very modernisation constituted the immorality of the city. This immorality was so overwhelming that the city becomes a place of sinfulness, as Christianity would understand it. The modernising programme extended to the development of the underground space beneath the city, and Pike describes a new way of experiencing and conceptualising the city as a vertical space in the nineteenth century, with its complex drainage systems, underground railways, utility tunnels, and storage vaults (p. 1). The renovation of the sewage system instigated a sanitising

impulse which attempted to combat the physiological and psychological urban pathologies of the modern city, so that urban sanitation became the privileged discourse with which to address the perceived blights of deviance and perversion. Alien urban categories, such as prostitution, homosexuality, and crime, were thus metaphorically assimilated to the space of the sewers (p. 4). For Pike, prostitutes become identified as the sewers of the city, transmitters of disease and immorality, disposal systems for excess male libidos, and are thresholds between above and below, between purity and filth (p. 192). So far as the nineteenth-century city is concerned, Pike affirms that the underground is the physical and conceptual trash heap of the modern world above (p. 5).

To complement the sociological and political significance of the underground, Pike writes of the mapping of the 'vertical cosmos of Christianity' (p. 5) onto the underground–overground axis of the city. The citizens who occupy the space of the underground are then designated as evil as well as being social outcasts.

It is this moral dimension of 'good' and 'evil' applied to the spaces of the Haussmannian city that will be discussed in the chapter. The space above ground — that of the bourgeoisie — is 'good', while the 'evil' underground harbours the social pariahs. This classification has been created by the bourgeoisie in their drive towards eternal progress, a mythology which must deny the past in order to forge into the future. All those belonging to the underground are left behind by the bourgeoisie and their ideology, and are necessarily identified with the past.

If the repression of those in the underground is immoral, as are the political demarcations of the underground and the overground, I propose that the Haussmannian city should be seen as an 'evil' city where the topography reflects the political corruption. This evil in the city is a physical phenomenon, such as the natural evil of Christianity's original sin which runs through the human body. It is the crack — physical and metaphorical — between the underground and the overground, and is the natural evil running through the social body and through the city infrastructure. Although the bourgeoisie has placed itself within the 'good' overground, the space above ground is nevertheless a bourgeois-designated space. This means that only members of the bourgeoisie are free to be there unhindered, so 'good' only has a benefit for the bourgeoisie.

Deleuze's conception of the *fêlure* provides a secular way of describing Christianity's natural evil or original sin. The latter is the consequence of immoral evil, or a wicked act, so that natural evil is, according to Christianity, a fault line of sin

running through the physical body of all of humanity. It is a consequence of Eve taking fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the biblical Garden of Eden, and the dissemination of natural evil represents the Fall of Man, or the lapse of humankind from innocence to a state of sin.

The physical fault line between the spaces of the underground and the overground in the city represents the sinfulness of the entire city, with a physical *fêlure* running through it. In Deleuze's description, it also has a dynamism which goes beyond simply being a physical crack:

La fêlure inversement ne poursuit son chemin, n'étend sa toile, ne change de direction, ne s'actualise dans chaque corps qu'en rapport avec les instincts qui lui ouvrent la voie, tantôt la recollant un peu, tantôt l'allongeant ou la creusant, jusqu'au craquement final, là encore assuré par le travail des instincts.⁶⁷

The *fêlure* has the ability to extend itself in relation to the instincts which 'open the way' for the trajectory of the *fêlure*. According to Deleuze, through the *fêlure* 'l'instinct cherche l'objet qui lui correspond dans les circonstances historiques et sociales de son genre de vie: le vin, l'argent, le pouvoir, la femme' (Deleuze, p. 9). Directed by the instincts, the *fêlure* shape-shifts as it travels, becoming smaller and larger, broadening and burrowing.

Deleuze makes a distinction between the interconnecting cycles of the instincts and the *fêlure*: 'une petite hérédité historique et une grande hérédité épique, une hérédité somatique et une hérédité germinale, une hérédité des instincts et une hérédité de la fêlure' (p. 11). While the instincts operate at the 'small heredity' of the human level, being 'historic' and 'somatic', the 'large heredity' of the *fêlure* denotes a level beyond the human, which is that of the 'epic'.

It is the suprahuman level of the *fêlure* that is of interest here. Its epic nature suggests a grand historical framework within which humanity must live. As a scheme which determines the life of a person or a nation, I suggest that the bourgeoisie's consigning of the lower classes to the underground constitutes an epic level of social control.

The underground figured as the space of the *fêlure* has been designated as a stigmatised space by the bourgeoisie, and it is also one of evil, as this chapter will show. However, the underground as *fêlure* is not merely metaphorical. Deleuze's description

⁶⁷ Gilles Deleuze, 'Préface: Zola et la fêlure', in Émile Zola, *La Bête humaine*, ed. by Henri Mitterand (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), pp. 7–24 (p. 13). The Preface originally appeared in *Logique du sens* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969).

of the *fêlure* as dynamically changing size and shape means that, as a buried space, it is possible to view the underground as an area which extends downwards from the city's topographical fault line and the cavernous entirety would comprise the *fêlure* of the Second Empire. The *fêlure* then becomes the actual space of the underground, and is the unseen expanse below the physical crack.

Deleuze considers the *fêlure* as 'le grand Vide intérieur'. The Second Empire's bourgeoisie would certainly consider the underground as a metaphorical and a literal space, a site for the lower classes of the underworld. The ultimate wickedness of this position lies in the meaning of the emptiness of the *fêlure*: it is the Death Instinct (Deleuze, pp. 11, 14). All those in the underground are in an environment which is not only marked as sinful, but also deathly.

ii) *L'Assommoir*: the politics of space in the overground

The experience of Gervaise in *L'Assommoir* keenly illustrates the action of the repressive underground on lower-class citizens. As a consequence of the Second Empire's mythology of progress, modernity must eliminate the 'primitive' past so that there is a straight line to eternal progress. For the non-bourgeois who have been placed in the underground, this means they undergo an alienation in their own city.

This mythology of progress, as a bourgeois ideology, is both subtle and overwhelming in its power to shape Second Empire society. On one hand, the division of the classes via the spaces of the overground and the underground is nothing less than totalitarian for the lower classes, while offering comparative freedom to the bourgeoisie. It is this apparent widespread freedom which masks the insidious nature of the mythology of progress.

The cultural critic Walter Benjamin recognises this to be the case. He quotes Blanqui, who says that 'there is no progress [...]. The universe repeats itself endlessly'.⁶⁸ Benjamin acknowledges the danger of trying to eradicate the past:

Formerly it was thought that a fixed point had been found in 'what has been', and one saw the present engaged in tentatively concentrating the forces of knowledge on this ground. Now this relation is to be overturned, and what has been is to become the dialectical reversal — the flash of awakened consciousness. Politics attains primacy over history.

⁶⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 26.

The facts become something that just now first happened to us, first struck us; to establish them is the affair of memory. Indeed, awakening is the great exemplar of memory: the occasion on which it is given us to remember what is closest, tritest, most obvious. What Proust intends with the experimental rearrangement of furniture in matinal half-slumber, what Bloch recognises as the darkness of the lived moment, is nothing other than what here is to be secured on the level of the historical, and collectively. There is a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been: its advancement has the structure of awakening. (Benjamin, pp. 388–89)

Benjamin discerns the possibility of politics overriding history, with the result that one can no longer rely on history being an accurate record of the past. If politics is successful in its goal to eliminate history, according to Benjamin, the danger is that the individual will not be able to register the historical, of which its events and traces may well never be recognised. If this happens to the individual, then it will certainly happen to the nation, ‘collectively’. The reference to Proust brings to mind his theory of the voluntary and involuntary memory: the former requires conscious effort in order for memories to be awoken, while the latter is evoked through chance incidents. In Benjamin’s Proustian reference, he is advocating the need for effortful voluntary memory to combat the monolithic nature of the Second Empire’s denial of the historical. The ‘structure of awakening’ to reach an historical consciousness would have to be a political act to counter that of the political regime which wishes to obliterate history. Benjamin goes further in condemning the immorality of such a regime, quoting Jung: ‘To be “unhistorical” is the Promethean sin. In this sense, modern man lives in sin. *Higher consciousness is thus guilt*’ (Benjamin, p. 399, emphasis in original).

Benjamin would recognise the rigid demarcation between the underground and the overground in Haussmann’s Paris. He writes of the ‘phenomenon of the boundary’ in the city, ‘those lines that [...] function as limits [and] threshold’. It is possible, however, to move beyond these borders, according to Benjamin. He recalls passageways in ancient Greece which lead into the underworld, with modern arcades being likened to ‘galleries leading into the city’s past’ (Benjamin, pp. 88, 84). In walking through one of these arcades, one could journey from modern Paris to the past. As modern Paris is a denial of the past, this would certainly be a revolutionary act.

On arrival into the past, which is the realm of the underground and the lower classes, there would be no sign of modern Paris. Benjamin, however, acknowledges the presence of the authentic ‘old’ Paris, and quotes Paul-Ernest de Rattier: ‘The true Paris is by nature a dark, miry, malodorous city, confined within its narrow lanes, [...]

swarming with blind alleys, culs-de-sac, and mysterious passages, with labyrinths that lead you to the devil'. According to Benjamin, the modern world is dominated by its phantasmagorias with the spectral presence of the past materialising into the present (Benjamin, pp. 523, 26). This, of course, is what Haussmann's Paris would wish to avoid.

Mircea Eliade, writing on the mythical beliefs of traditional tribes, observes that not to know or to forget the contents of the 'collective memory' constituted by tradition is equivalent to a sin or a disaster.⁶⁹ These tribes acknowledge and honour the fact that they have a collective past as a community, and to do so is a life-affirming act. In Haussmann's Paris, there is no collective memory because the past has been eradicated and the collective has been politically fragmented into the underground and the overground. To return to a state of restored collective memory, that is, to a state without sin, the tribes would advocate knowing the myths to learn the secret of the origin of things (Eliade, pp. 13–14). In the case of Haussmann's Paris, that would mean having consciousness of the Second Empire's mythology of progress.

It is this lack of consciousness that creates the tragedy of Gervaise's life in *L'Assommoir*. The Zola critic Auguste Dezalay writes of the theme of 'la chute' in the novel, and he identifies Gervaise's moral fall when she returns to Lantier.⁷⁰ However, it would also be appropriate to view her fall into the underground as one engineered by the Haussmannian city. While Dezalay's observation lays the moral blame on Gervaise herself, responsibility should also be attributed to the political framework around her.

Henri Mitterand identifies Zola's use of time and space as part of the 'deep structure' which ranges across his novels.⁷¹ Based on Bakhtin's theory, this 'modèle chronotopique', unites 'une époque et un lieu' into a single frame of reference (p. 185). Mitterand marks out Hugo and Zola in particular as writers who use this model in their novels, but the symbol of the chronotope had pervaded nineteenth-century writing in general. It was used to signify the fragility of the individual 'enfermé' in the tunnels of history and the horror of annihilation (p. 193). The use of the motif signified the

69 Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Illinois: Waveland, 1998), p. 125. Originally published in French (1963). Eliade describes a tribal belief that the person who can recollect possesses a precious magico-religious power (p. 90). Many archaic societies live by cyclical time, and they are obliged to periodically remember mythical history by re-enacting it through ritual (p. 13). By doing so, it is possible to renew life by returning to origins and accessing the energy and fecundity that occurred at the creation of the world (p. 30).

70 Auguste Dezalay, 'Commentaires', in Émile Zola, *L'Assommoir*, ed. by Auguste Dezalay (Paris: Fasquelle, 1983), pp. 499–528 (p. 502).

71 Henri Mitterand, *Zola: l'histoire et la fiction* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990), p. 117.

merging of three factors: the new civilisation of nineteenth-century European society, new working conditions in the mine and factories, and class conflict (p. 195). For Mitterand, the idea of space in novels such as *L'Assommoir* and *Germinal* are firmly to do with power: there are those who 'distribue[nt]' the earth; the individual must make do with the space in which she lives her life, inhabiting the 'horizon d'atteinte'; and it is a social sphere where the work and behaviour of crowds are organised and regulated (p. 200). Mitterand agrees with Philippe Hamon in observing the relationship between the self and the milieu, in that the 'personnage ne sortira pas'. This nexus becomes, then, a 'lieu-milieu' (p. 202). On a menacing note, Mitterand describes space as a 'terrain de lutte' because it is subject to 'un cadre régulateur' (p. 206). In suggesting that strategic skills are important in being able to negotiate Zolian space, it may additionally be likened to a chessboard, 'cet espace-échiquier' (p. 208).

The politics of time and space also preoccupied writers during the Second Empire. In her analysis of the texts and catalogues for the international exhibition held in Paris in 1855, only four months after the proclamation of the Second Empire, Anne Green observes that they work to legitimise the new Empire. These texts put forward the concept of newness as an exemplary attribute, something which marks a fundamental break with the past.⁷² Confronted with this rhetoric of the new, Green shows that many Second Empire writers were preoccupied with the idea of ruin in its broadest sense, the breakdown of order, and the imagery of collapse in an attempt to counter this ideology (p. 147). The portrayals of ruins by Second Empire writers were politicised and violent, and Green suggests that Flaubert, for example, politicises the destruction and rebuilding of Carthage in *Salammbô* in such a way that it makes parallels with Haussmann's rebuilding of Second Empire Paris inescapable. A short passage in the novel describes the hierarchies of race being replaced by differences in wealth, and it hints at the emergence of new class tensions (pp. 148–49). Pierre Véron shows the disordering of society through Haussmannisation in his poem 'Le Vieux Paris': to demolish a house was to destroy an entire family history by erasing ancestral memories and severing precious connections with the past (p. 151). Green considers that the Second Empire ruin is portrayed by writer after writer as being on the verge of crashing to the ground, and it is this that acts as the perfect metaphor for a society whose basic values have been eroded and which is in imminent danger of collapse (p. 153).⁷³ In contrast to the

⁷² Anne Green, *Changing France: Literature and Material Culture in the Second Empire* (London: Anthem Press, 2011), p. 6.

⁷³ Anne Green suggests authors such as Albert Angot, *Nos Ruines* (1871); Victor Hugo, *Les Travailleurs*

Romantic notion of ruins which is usually associated with slow decline, Green suggests that the ruins in Second Empire texts convey disturbance to the natural order. Instead, there is the implication of a violent cataclysm and a chronological process that becomes so disrupted that time itself has been shattered (p. 158).

The lines and limits of the city described by Benjamin, denoting boundaries, and also traces of the *fêlure*, are evident in the poorer districts of the Haussmannian city as depicted in *L'Assommoir*. As Gervaise returns home to the hôtel Boncœur, it is described as ‘une allée noire, étroite, avec un ruisseau longeant le mur, pour les eaux sales’.⁷⁴ Delimited space is marked out by straight lines, and the confined nature of this lower-class residence is emphasised by the adjective ‘narrow’.

The crampedness of the architecture also extends to the limitedness of Gervaise’s life. After Lantier has left her, she looks out of her window:

Elle enfila d’un regard les boulevards extérieurs, à droite, à gauche, s’arrêtant aux deux bouts, prise d’une épouvante sourde, comme si sa vie, désormais, allait tenir là, entre un abattoir et un hôpital. (*RM*, II, 403)

Even the sweep of her gaze to left and right is restricted by the two boulevards, which are prominent features of the Haussmannian city. Already, modern Paris is confining Gervaise’s life in this early part of the novel. There is the small narratorial suggestion of this in the phrase ‘as if her life would take place between an abattoir and a hospital’, but she herself does not even seem to register the fact that her perception is limited by the new city being built around her, as is her life. Of course, this free indirect discourse is instrumental in helping the reader understand that Gervaise, as a person of the underground, would not necessarily have any consciousness that the city topography is deliberately repressing her. Indeed, her life will undoubtedly be filled with illness and death as the quotation suggests.

The building in which the Lorilleux couple live is another example of typical lower-class lodgings:

Du haut en bas, les logements trop petits crevaient au-dehors, lâchaient des bouts de leur misère par toutes les fentes. En bas, desservant chaque façade, une porte haute et étroite, sans boiserie, taillée dans le nu du plâtre, creusait un vestibule lézardé, au fond duquel tournaient les marches boueuses d’un escalier à rampe de fer. (*RM*, II, 414–15)

The space is too small for the needs of the inhabitants, so that the poverty ‘bursts

de la mer (1866); Gustave Flaubert, *La Tentation de saint Antoine* (1856).

74 Émile Zola, ‘L’Assommoir’, in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, ed. by Lanoux and Mitterand, II (1961), 402.

outside' from 'cracks' in the building. The hallway is also 'cracked'. Outside, there are some 'pavés disjoints' (*RM*, II, 415). The cracks and general squalor are what would be expected of lodgings for the poor, but the fissures recall the *fêlure* which marks this building as being within the space of the underground.

In stark contrast to this poor neighbourhood, the bourgeois space of the Louvre is completely different. Gervaise's wedding party goes to visit, and they discover that 'c'était très grand, on pouvait se perdre'. Indeed, the space is so large that the party becomes lost in trying to find its way out of the building. In one gallery, they are amazed at the floor, 'un parquet luisant, clair comme un miroir, où les pieds des banquettes se reflétaient'. The bourgeois space is clean and bright, but above all it is smooth with no cracks anywhere (*RM*, II, 444).

If a lack of space defines the working-class life, then a lack of time constitutes another limitation. After a very short interval after giving birth to Nana, Gervaise is doing her normal chores around the house. The reason for this seeming conscientiousness is that 'lorsqu'on n'était pas riche, on n'avait pas le temps'. Again, the free indirect style of this statement is a technique that offers a truism to the reader with Gervaise not necessarily being fully conscious of this, or at least believing it to be such a commonplace assumption that it cannot ever be questioned. Of course, time is never on the side of the working class in the Haussmannian city because it is a place which privileges eternal progress. The bourgeoisie have commandeered the notion of time, and the politicisation of it has stigmatised the poor. However, Gervaise may intuitively know that it is important to keep time on her side. After saving some money, she buys a clock in which she keeps her savings. Her ambition is to 's'établir, louer une petite boutique'. In her own way, Gervaise is trying to better herself and the buying of the clock underscores the symbolism of reclaiming power from the bourgeoisie (*RM*, II, 472, 476).

When Gervaise opens her laundry business, her life opens up and the space around her becomes less restricted. She stands on her doorstep and feels 'le gonflement de vanité d'une commerçante, qui a un bout de trottoir à elle. La rue de la Goutte-d'Or lui appartenait, et les rues voisines, et le quartier tout entier' (*RM*, II, 500). Being a successful business owner, she feels that the city space, the pavement itself, 'is hers'. The street and the surrounding neighbourhood 'belonged' to her.

Gervaise's life has improved immensely since the time when Lantier left her. She is proud to have opened her business, and one day 'elle jetait un regard à gauche, un

regard à droite, aux deux bouts, pour prendre d'un trait les passants, les maisons, le pavé et le ciel' (*RM*, II, 500). This is a direct reference to the time when her life was less positive. Now she is able to look left and right on the street outside without any restraints to boundary, and she can even look beyond the street towards the sky. Notably, there is a clockmaker opposite her premises (*RM*, II, 501) that Gervaise always looks at on her way in and out. Again, it may be that Gervaise intuitively feels that time must be on her terms if she is to prosper. The symbolism of Gervaise's buying of a clock as an attempt to wrest some power from the bourgeoisie has now moved on. Now that she is a business owner she has advanced one step towards being part of the bourgeoisie, and Gervaise's glancing at the clockmaker opposite is a mark of self-assurance that she is progressing since the clock is also a symbol of the bourgeois lifestyle.

However, when Gervaise becomes destitute at the end of the novel, space again becomes a confining element for her. She feels alienated in the Haussmannian city when she wanders the streets, starving:

Ce quartier, où elle éprouvait une honte, tant il embellissait, s'ouvrait maintenant de toutes parts au grand air. Le boulevard Magenta, montant du cœur de Paris, et le boulevard Ornano, s'en allant dans la campagne, l'avaient troué à l'ancienne barrière, un fier abattis de maisons, deux vastes avenues encore blanches de plâtre, qui gardaient à leurs flancs les rues du Faubourg-Poissonnière et des Poissonniers, dont les bouts s'enfonçaient, écornés, mutilés, tordus comme des boyaux sombres. Depuis longtemps, la démolition du mur de l'octroi avait déjà élargi les boulevards extérieurs, avec les chaussées latérales et le terre-plein au milieu pour les piétons, planté de quatre rangées de petits platanes. C'était un carrefour immense débouchant au loin sur l'horizon, par des voies sans fin, grouillantes de foule, se noyant dans le chaos perdu des constructions. Mais, parmi les hautes maisons neuves, bien des masures branlantes restaient debout; entre les façades sculptées, des enfoncements noirs se creusaient, des chenils bâillaient, étalant les loques de leurs fenêtres. Sous le luxe montant de Paris, la misère du faubourg crevait et salissait ce chantier d'une ville nouvelle, si hâtivement bâtie. Perdue dans la cohue du large trottoir, le long des petits platanes, Gervaise se sentait seule et abandonnée. Ces échappées d'avenues, tout là-bas, lui vidaient l'estomac davantage; et dire que, parmi ce flot de monde, où il y avait pourtant des gens à leur aise, pas un chrétien ne devinait sa situation et ne lui glissait dix sous dans la main! Oui, c'était trop grand, c'était trop beau, sa tête tournait et ses jambes s'en allaient, sous ce pan démesuré de ciel gris, tendu au-dessus d'un si vaste espace. (*RM*, II, 764–65)

Gervaise, the person relegated to the underground in her impoverished state, has wandered onto the overground of modern Paris. The overwhelming feeling that she experiences is that of shame, and this is evoked by the sheer beauty of the new city. The

grandeur of modern Paris does not inspire any feelings of wonder in Gervaise, but instead produces a feeling of humiliation. The space of the overground generates a shame that is socially sanctioned by the bourgeoisie. Despite being within a crowd, Gervaise feels ‘lost, alone and abandoned’. This is the alienation created by the overground, but Gervaise would most certainly be one of Benjamin’s phantasmagorias, the past materialising into the present. Ghostlike, she is ignored by the people who were ‘at ease’ around her. The monolith of the Haussmannian city is still being erected because vast avenues are ‘still white with rubble’. It is a ‘new city, so hastily built’, yet there is still evidence of the old streets which are ‘chipped, mutilated and twisted’. It is still possible to see the hovels ‘blackly buried’ among the sculpted facades of the new buildings. The new roadways radiating through the city are ‘immense’ and ‘endless’. Finally, the city is ‘too large, too beautiful’, which signals the absolute hold of the bourgeois overground on the city.

Despite the immense vastness of the space of the city, Gervaise feels hemmed in. In the snowy streets, she is suffering greatly from starvation, and feels that ‘des murs gris l’enfermaient. Et, quand elle s’arrêtait, hésitante, tournant la tête, elle devinait, derrière ce voile de glace, l’immensité des avenues, les files interminables des becs de gaz, tout cet infini noir et désert de Paris endormi’ (*RM*, II, 774).

The alienation that Gervaise feels recalls Baudelaire’s poem ‘Le Cygne’. As the speaker of the poem is walking through the new Carrousel, he remembers the old Paris and laments that ‘le vieux Paris n’est plus’.⁷⁵ The speaker sees a swan in the street escaped from its cage, a creature which is completely out of its element. It is most naturally found by rivers, but it has to contend with being next to a dried-up gutter. This inspires pity within the speaker, who sees the swan as ‘ce malheureux, mythe étrange et fatal’ (Baudelaire, *Verse*, p. 199). Gervaise’s situation is very like that of the swan, exiled from her own city. She is also from the mythical past that the Haussmannian city is trying so hard to suppress.

The shame caused by the beauty of modern Paris appears in another Baudelaire work, the prose poem ‘Les Yeux des pauvres’. A man is recounting a day spent with his beloved in Paris. However, it is not a memory that fills him with joy because the first line reads ‘vous voulez savoir pourquoi je vous hais aujourd’hui’.⁷⁶ He tells how they sit

75 Charles Baudelaire, *The Complete Verse*, trans. by Francis Scarfe, 2nd edn (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 2012), p. 198.

76 Charles Baudelaire, *Petits poèmes en prose*, ed. by Robert Kopp (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1968), p. 78.

in a cafe on the corner of a boulevard, and the adjective ‘neuf’ (p. 78) is used to describe both. The interior of the cafe ‘étincelait’ (p. 79) with its blinding white walls and gold ornamentation. Onto this idyllic scene comes a poor man with a young boy and a baby in tow, all in rags. The speaker notes that the eyes of all three newcomers are astonished by the interior, and it is as if their eyes are saying ‘Que c’est beau!’ (p. 79). The older child wonders at the sight, but his eyes also seem to say ‘mais c’est une maison où peuvent seuls entrer les gens qui ne sont pas comme nous’ (p. 79). Even a boy of this young age is able to detect the unspoken rules of the overground. The speaker of the poem becomes aware of the social difference between himself and the newcomers: ‘je me sentais un peu honteux de nos verres et de nos carafes, plus grands que notre soif’ (p. 80). The difference is only exacerbated by his partner, who tells him to ask for ‘ces gens-là’ (p. 80) to be taken away.

In his discussion of the same poem, the Marxist critic Marshall Berman writes that the male narrator sees his personal happiness as class privilege, and that the boulevard forces them to ‘react politically’.⁷⁷ Baudelaire advocated a new language and artistic style in his prose poems to convey modern life, and Berman describes this as the creation of ‘primal modern scenes: experiences that arise from the concrete everyday life of Bonaparte’s and Haussmann’s Paris but carry a mythic resonance and depth that propel them beyond their place and time and transform them into archetypes of modern life’ (Berman, p. 148). The image of the alienated Gervaise wandering the streets of modern Paris carries this same sense of mythic resonance, an emblem of an underground creature trespassing onto the overground of the bourgeoisie.

For Berman, the appearance of the family of three reveals ‘a repressed reality’ as ‘alongside the glitter, [is] the rubble: the ruins of a dozen inner-city neighbourhoods’ (Berman, p. 152). The houses of the poor have been knocked down by Haussmann, and the land is then used to build domestic and commercial properties for the bourgeoisie. The rubble that Gervaise sees as she wanders through modern Paris is the only reminder of what is left of the previously working-class space before it is supplanted by bourgeois space.

As Gervaise comes to the end of her life, the repressive closing-in reaches its climax. After le père Bru dies under the stairs, the landlord gives Gervaise the newly vacated spot. This area is variously described as the ‘trou’ and the ‘niche’ (*RM*, II, 796).

⁷⁷ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, new edn (London: Verso, 2010), p. 154.

This area is not metaphorically a niche, but is literally a hole. This is the place where Gervaise dies, so the bourgeois overground has finally closed off all space available to her.

iii) *Nana*: the underground as the underworld

While the working-class Gervaise is an alienated and powerless person in the overground of Paris, her daughter Nana's underground status is much more potent. As a prostitute, Nana is one of Pike's underworld beings and Zola's depiction of her is of a powerful character destabilising Paris society. Her power comes from her hold over her male clients, but the particularly malevolent nature of this power is a result of her being part of the underground. The bourgeoisie has figured the underground as the space of the *fêlure*, so Nana's underworld should be considered as the space of hell and Nana herself as a devilish figure.

In his assessment of the character Nana, Peter Brooks interprets her as a phantasmic figure. Although much of the novel is about the undressing of Nana as courtesan and actress, Brooks perceives that she is never really completely nude and comments that 'even the completely naked woman's body bears a troubling veil' in the novel.⁷⁸ Indeed, Nana is a kind of Second Empire pinup and a 'kitsch Venus', taking on an aesthetic which, Brooks claims, is not endorsed by Zola (pp. 9, 10). In his analysis of the scene where Muffat is with the undressed Nana who is looking at herself in the mirror, Brooks notes that there is a veil over Nana's sex which is composed of her pubic hair and the shadow thrown by her limbs. This scene is an encapsulation of the 'ultimate veil', the woman's sex as 'unknowable and unrepresentable'. The male glance can then only slide into the allegorical, to 'evocations of Biblical monster and of the beast' (p. 19). However, it is the very unrepresentability of Nana's genitalia which represents her power. Following Freud's description of the castrated female whereby the missing phallus becomes a 'something that is nothing, nothing that is something' (p. 24), Brooks is able to illustrate the unavailability of Nana. So it is that Muffat tries to possess her in a sexual act in which he knows he possesses nothing (p. 22), and none of her other lovers can possess her because '[t]here is no way into her' (p. 24). Nevertheless, the character Mignon sees Nana's genitals as 'nothing' but takes on the Freudian male view

78 Peter Brooks, 'Storied Bodies, or Nana at Last Unveil'd', *Critical Inquiry*, 16 (1989), 1–32 (p. 2).

when he says that Nana's sex is a lever whose force can lift the globe. For Brooks, Mignon's comment turns Nana's sex into 'an antiphallus more powerful than the male member' (p. 27). Finally, Brooks considers that Zola's final allegorising of Nana's genitalia is because it is the only way to represent the true, which is the dynamic nature of Nana's sex (pp. 27–28).

In her use of structural semantics in the exploration of the meaning of crowds in Zola's novels, Naomi Schor explores the lines of difference which delineate sex and class in *Nana*. Taking inspiration from Elias Canetti's 'double crowd structure', Schor proposes that Zola's crowd 'is always double'.⁷⁹ This becomes evident in the opening scene of *Nana*, where, according to Schor, the crowd entering the theatre where Nana will shortly be on stage is a microcosm of the sexually polarised society depicted in the novel. At first the crowd is undifferentiated and unisexual, then it becomes divided into two separate groups which are spatially distinct: as if 'split' by the physical presence of the double staircase, the women are above and the men below. Schor describes this image of the split crowd as 'opposed as prostitute vs. client' (pp. 89–90). The opposition of 'the male vs. female crowd' is maintained in the narrative as the audience take their seats: people are described through metonyms (parts of bodies, elements of dress), and the division between male and female is strengthened by the image of a light (female) vs. dark (male) contrast. This is further bolstered by an 'active/passive paradigm' within Zola's description of the audience: 'male activity (= verticality + mobility) vs. female passivity (= horizontality + immobility)'. The difference between male and female is confirmed when the fevered male response to Nana's presence on stage is emphasised, while the female response is absent in the narrative (p. 90). The spatial split between male and female also occurs in the final chapter. While Nana is dying, her male friends are downstairs and her female friends are upstairs with her (p. 91). For Schor, the confrontation between the novel's prostitutes and the police is a dramatisation of the inseparability of the 'social and sexual axes'. Nana's victory will be in reversing the reigning power structure by oppressing rich men (p. 97).

The scene in which Nana forces the men to watch her being openly affectionate with her female lover Satin at the dinner table is, however, not enough to endanger the patriarchal-paternalistic system: Nana, as the 'golden fly', carries poison upwards from the dung heap, but this cannot damage the 'vertical axis which [...] is social hierarchy' (p. 98). However, Schor observes that the male social order is endangered when female

⁷⁹ Naomi Schor, *Zola's Crowds* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 87.

bonding converges with class lines as it calls into question all ‘structuring differences’ (p. 99). Schor’s proposal is that the founding myth of Zola’s crowd-fictions is based on the ritual slaying or expulsion of the scapegoat, or *pharmakos*, which offers catharsis for a collectivity in order to restore peace and harmony (pp. 5, 6). For Schor, Nana is a *pharmakos* because the central concern of the novel is not male desire, but sexual difference (p. 103). As Nana is female and in a position of power, she must be punished by death. She syncretises two functions as ‘mediator and leader’: these are incompatible because ‘the leader is defined by *his* will to power and the mediator by *her* passivity’. Nana’s death becomes inevitable as order must be restored on account of her ‘monstrous syncretism’ (pp. 166, 167).

Brian Nelson’s analysis of Nana also recognises the need for men in the novel to subordinate her power. He discusses Nana as a female body that has been transformed into a symbol onto which the male gaze projects meaning. Throughout the novel, despite Nana’s position as object in relation to men’s desire, there is a difficulty in her representability which reinforces her elusiveness.⁸⁰ Through the male erotic imagination, Nana the actress is transformed into a figure of fantasy. Men try to unveil her with their eyes in order to see what lies beneath and Muffat, unable to see her as an individual female body, keeps her veiled. Nelson observes that Zola uses the concept of the veil to mediate between presence and absence in portraying Nana (p. 408). It is the male ‘gaze (gauze)’ enveloping Nana which metamorphoses her into Venus. As a powerfully sexual woman, Nana must be figured as fantasy in order not to pose a threat to the authority of male sexuality (p. 409). Nelson notes that the men also project their nightmares onto her, so that she is also an ogress, a vampire, and ‘mangeuse d’hommes’ (p. 410). More generally, she represents for men the disintegration of moral values, of family life, of man’s power, and also France’s power (p. 412). Nelson considers Nana’s body to be a text, functioning as a signifier, immersed in ‘signifying networks’, and which is able to be read for meaning (p. 413). Her body becomes a text that is constructed from the images and myths projected onto her, and the myth becomes the text read into Nana’s body (p. 414). For Nelson, there are also veils in the text which represent the boundary between absence and presence (p. 416), and he gives the example of Zola describing Nana’s sexuality as ‘ce rien honteux’, but also as ‘si

⁸⁰ Brian Nelson, ‘Nana: Uses of the Female Body’, *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 38 (2001), 407–29 (p. 407).

puissante'. This, then, positions Nana in the terms of myth, fantasy, and metaphor within a phallogentric narrative.

The very notion of absence is, Nelson maintains, a threat to the narcissistic self and the patriarchal order (p. 424). The threat which absence poses may be illustrated in Freudian and Lacanian terms: Freud's gendering of the subject at the Oedipal stage means that both male and female subjects will view the mother (and all women) as castrated and lacking, without the possibility of a 'presence' (p. 425). Lacan provides an equally patriarchal reading: in desiring to return to a state of oneness with the mother, the child needs to recreate the illusion of 'plenitude' and 'possession' through the 'transcendental signifier', the symbolic (non-biological) phallus, which is perceived as 'presence' rather than 'absence'. It is through the phallus that a form of binary opposition can be reinstated, which will allow the narcissistic restitution of the self. Once the original mother is defined as absent, woman can only occupy the place of man's symbolic construction of her as Woman: she no longer really exists and can therefore no longer be possessed (p. 426). For Nelson, Nana functions as Lacan's 'metonymically shifting signifier' so that possession can never be achieved; she is a symbolic construction which man creates to fill the original absence. However, she is able to accrue meaning through her status as myth, fulfilling her role as 'transcendental signifier' (p. 427).

In the end, it is only through Nana's death that she can finally be possessed. Following Elisabeth Bronfen,⁸¹ Nelson notes the gendering of the textual structure as a patriarchally inflected symbolism in regard to Nana's death. After the first stage of death where the body is abject because it is in a state of decomposition, the second stage is reached when the abject body once more becomes a demarcated whole as a skeleton. The dead body can then become 'other', and takes up its position within a binary opposition by entering the realm of the symbolic. It is at this point that Nana, as shifting signifier, can finally be controlled by being fixed as a symbolic image. The abject has been made containable, and it is the final reclamation of the female body by a patriarchal symbolic and textual system (pp. 428, 429).

Nana is first introduced as the actress playing Venus in the operetta 'La Blonde Vénus'. She is an attractive, young woman and Zola describes her as having 'un sourire aigu de mangeuse d'hommes'.⁸² The theatre promoter Bordenave relies on Nana's

81 Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (New York, Routledge, 1992).

82 Émile Zola, 'Nana', in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, ed. by Lanoux and Mitterand, II (1961), 1118.

image and reputation as a man-eater to pull in the audiences. In her first performance in the role of Venus, Zola writes that she 'avait pris possession du public et maintenant chaque homme la subissait' (*RM*, II, 1119). Nana is slowly taking hold of the Parisian public. Soon 'la salle entière vacillait, glissait à un vertige' (*RM*, II, 1120), and later the men leaving the theatre are burning from 'la possession de Nana' (*RM*, II, 1122). This is the beginning of Nana's devilish influence, whereby she 'possesses' men. The audience experiencing vertigo would feel a sensation of whirling and loss of balance as if looking down from a great height. Many of Nana's future clients in the audience are aristocrats or bourgeois, so this is a symbolic expression of their looking into the underground from their position overhead in the overground. The narrative voice of the Venus scene is implicitly male and bourgeois.

Supporting Nana's portrayal as a figure of the underworld, her working environment in the theatre is portrayed as if it were actually underground. Count Muffat, who slowly becomes obsessed with Nana, walks to her dressing room along the corridor. The restricted space of the corridor already hints at enclosure, but Zola makes it more explicit by describing the surroundings as 'une vie souterraine, avec des profondeurs d'obscurité, des voix d'hommes, des souffles de cave' (*RM*, II, 1206).

Muffat begins to feel the discomfort of apparently being underground. He begins to sweat and needs to take off his hat because of 'l'étouffement de l'air, épaissi, surchauffé'. It is as if Muffat is walking deeper into the earth. Muffat raises his head to glance at the stairwell and, 'en haut' he can hear laughter and doors opening and closing. All the while, Muffat feels 'le frisson de cette trouée ardente sur un monde qu'il ignorait'. Again, the aristocratic Muffat who hails from the overground is afforded a peep into the underground through this 'gap' (*RM*, II, 1206).

Bordenave is keen to support this travelling into the underworld from the bourgeois and aristocratic section of society. He suggests to some high-profile male guests that they could leave the dressing room area via an alleyway to avoid having to go into the passage des Panoramas. This route is not so much to save time, but to avoid being seen. It is described as 'une sorte de ruelle étranglée qu'on avait couverte d'une toiture en pente, où s'ouvraient des châssis vitrés. Une humidité suintait des murailles. Les pas sonnaient sur le sol dallé, comme dans un souterrain' (*RM*, II, 1227). The guests would still be in the realm of the underworld, so it is fitting that their footsteps would ring out 'as if underground'.

Muffat's Catholic upbringing colours his view of Nana as being the Devil himself.

When he watches her getting ready as Venus in her dressing room, he feels ‘la lente possession dont Nana l’envahissait’. This possession has moved on from a mere obsession to full diabolic possession: ‘Il croyait au diable. Nana, confusément, était le diable, avec ses rires, avec sa gorge et sa croupe, gonflées de vices’. Although Muffat only believes her to be the Devil because of his suffering, her position as a creature of the underground–*fêlure* actually supports her as being the Devil (*RM*, II 1213).

Not only is Nana figured as the Devil, but she becomes evil itself for Muffat:

En trois mois, elle avait corrompu sa vie, il se sentait déjà gâté jusqu’aux moelles par des ordures qu’il n’aurait pas soupçonnées. Tout allait pourrir en lui, à cette heure. Il eut un instant conscience des accidents du mal, il vit la désorganisation apportée par ce ferment, lui empoisonné, sa famille détruite, un coin de société qui craquait et s’effondrait [...]. Il songeait à son ancienne horreur de la femme, au monstre de l’Écriture, lubrique, sentant le fauve. Nana était toute velue, un duvet de rousse faisait de son corps un velours; tandis que, dans sa croupe et ses cuisses de cavale, dans les renflements charnus creusés de plis profonds, qui donnaient au sexe le voile troublant de leur ombre, il y avait de la bête. C’était la bête d’or, inconsciente comme une force, et dont l’odeur seule gâtait le monde. Muffat regardait toujours, obsédé, possédé, au point qu’ayant fermé les paupières pour ne plus voir, l’animal reparut au fond des ténèbres, grandi, terrible, exagérant sa posture. Maintenant, il serait là, devant ses yeux, dans sa chair, à jamais. (*RM*, II, 1270–71)

For Muffat, Nana becomes natural evil itself ‘corrupting’ his life and harming him ‘to the marrow’. She is also an evil force creating ‘disorganisation’, and Muffat has visions of ‘his family destroyed, and society cracking and collapsing’. She is the biblical ‘monster of the Scriptures’ and the ‘golden beast’, ‘like a force’. She is at once mythological and physical ‘before his eyes, in his flesh, forever’. Muffat’s ‘sensation de chute’ (*RM*, II, 1277) means that the aristocrat of the overground has lost his innocence and fallen into the underground hell.

Nana’s ruining of society is described in terms of empty space and absence. She has a taste for spending, ‘un continuel caprice de mangeuse et de gâcheuse’ (*RM*, II, 1350) which is insatiable. Vandevres gives Nana between eight and ten thousand francs a month, but given the opportunity Nana would ‘d’une bouchée avaler son dernier château’ (*RM*, II, 1351). Vandevres’s losing of his fortune is described as being ‘vidé par le jeu et les femmes’ (*RM*, II, 1370). She ruins the businessman Steiner: ‘elle le rendit au pavé, sucé jusqu’aux moelles, si vidé, qu’il resta même incapable d’inventer une coquinerie nouvelle’ (*RM*, II, 1455).

The images of depletion and emptiness continue with the description of Nana’s

mansion: 'l'hôtel semblait bâti sur un gouffre, les hommes avec leurs biens, leurs corps, jusqu'à leurs noms, s'y engloutissaient' (*RM*, II, 1433). The gulf in which men's fortunes, bodies and names disappear is the underground-*fêlure* which is Nana's domain.

As Nana's influence corrupts Paris, the underground as the space of the *fêlure* moves upwards to the overground. This may be seen at the engagement party for Muffat's daughter, where the music seems to shake the walls. The orchestra is playing the waltz from 'La Blonde Vénus', the operetta in which Nana had played the role of Venus at the start of the novel:

Et ce tressaillement des murs, cette nuée rouge, étaient comme la flambée dernière, où craquait l'antique honneur brûlant aux quatre coins du logis [...]. Maintenant, la fêlure augmentait; elle lézardait la maison, elle annonçait l'effondrement prochain [...]. Ici [...] la valse sonnait le glas d'une vieille race, pendant que Nana, invisible, épandue au-dessus du bal avec ses membres souples, décomposait ce monde, le pénétrait du ferment de son odeur. (*RM*, II, 1429–30)

The *fêlure* as a physical crack travels through the house, and it is notable that the word *fêlure* is used so that the fissure retains the intimation of evil. Eventually it will work its way to other houses, then whole streets and districts will collapse under the pressure of fractures. Zola depicts an apocalypse, the destruction of a world by 'explosion', where 'antique honour cracked and burned'. The devastation is that of the overtaking of a political order, the old aristocracy being engulfed by the new bourgeoisie, for which the music sounds 'the knell of an old race'. It is a hellish vision as the bourgeoisie physically spreads its immorality throughout Paris, destroying it in the process.

Modernity for the Second Empire was expressed as a mythology of progress. It was a bourgeois ideology which needed the past to be eradicated in order for eternal progress to be made possible. The concept of the underground was created to accommodate anything that was of the past, and this included the poorer classes. This mythology of progress thus manifested itself in terms of time and space. Those relegated to the underground would experience an alienation in their own city if they intruded onto the bourgeois overground. Space would also be restricted to those from the underground, as the Haussmannian city tries to disperse this unwanted population to the peripheries. The immoral nature of this programme is revealed through the concept of Zola's mythical *fêlure*, which stands for evil, both secular and Christian. The *fêlure* highlights the political demarcation of the overground and the underground by being the

interface between the two spaces, and it also represents the underground as the underworld, or the Christian hell. The *fêlure* as an architectural crack gives this usually metaphorical concept a materiality, so that the ruin of society can be illustrated by aristocratic and bourgeois men falling into the underground because of their libidinous needs and also by the physical collapse of buildings.

Chapter 3

Women

The two previous chapters have focused on the degenerative effects of the bourgeoisie on Second Empire France. Chapter 1 discussed degeneration as the naturalist expression of Napoleon III's political corruption, leading to the inexorable decline of France. The degeneration is represented as a physical sickness, which emanates from Napoleon III's political body to that of the decadent bourgeoisie. The combining of the moral and the physiological within the discourse of degeneration allowed Zola to pursue his Naturalist agenda in his criticism of the Second Empire. Chapter 2 discussed Haussmann's Paris as the locus of repression in the Second Empire's frenetic pursuit of wealth. The new topography of the city was designed for bourgeois interests, and it resulted in a metropolis with an immoral infrastructure where sin, or Zola's *fêlure*, is embedded in the very foundations. The new urban arrangement reinforced the Second Empire's modern myth of eternal progress. This chapter brings together the themes of chapters 1 and 2, exploring the presence of degenerative sickness within Paris, and it will focus on a gendered reading of this malaise. This sickness will be studied in relation to the damaging effect on women in the two novels *La Curée* and *Au Bonheur des Dames*. The sickness is a material corruption borne by bourgeois women as a result of the financial activities of bourgeois men. The Christian myth of original sin becomes intertwined with degenerative illness, so that the consequent natural evil is then both pathological and mythological. The myth of sacrifice as a legitimisation of authority in modern times is shown to be a literal act, violence which is condoned in the age of high capitalism.

Zola's two novels show the commercial imperative in modern Paris as extreme and violent in nature. The main protagonists of the novels, Aristide Saccard and Octave Mouret, are the innovators behind the financial activity in the city. Their degenerate behaviour is illustrative of Nordau's definition of the '*fin-de-siècle* state of mind'. This encourages an 'unbridled lewdness, the unchaining of the beast in man [...], the trampling under foot of all barriers which enclose brutal greed of lucre and lust of pleasure [plus] the shameless ascendancy of base impulses and motives' (Nordau, pp. 1, 5). Nordau's vision of the barbaric chaos of degeneration is depicted by Zola as a real consequence of the Second Empire's extreme capitalism in the novels. The ultra-violence of Paris is such that the notion of sacrifice, I suggest, should be called upon as

a pertinent way of describing the treatment of women in the two novels. The women's suffering makes them human sacrifices and, in the French meaning of sacrifice, the women are also reduced to the level of commodities. The myth of sacrifice also invokes the sacred, and this is a modern form of establishing political authority. Therefore, Zola's degenerate characters Saccard and Mouret must pursue the myth of sacrifice if they are to make as much money as possible.

Degenerative sickness is presented as fever and also cognitive and bodily malaise in the two novels. This febrility is also in the very fabric of the city, and, in *La Curée*, it fires Saccard's desire to make money from financial speculation. However, it is his wife Renée who suffers, mentally and physically, from the lifestyle created by the immense wealth generated by her husband's immoral activities. This feverish malady is also experienced by the female customers in Mouret's department store in *Au Bonheur des Dames*. This sickness, exploited by Mouret, is what makes them buy indiscriminately, thereby creating enormous profits for him. The loss of reason as a symptom of degeneration becomes real for Renée and the women shoppers.

The chapter will trace the degenerative sickness through its passage from illness to natural evil, or Christianity's original sin. This malaise is closely linked to the female body, which provides a conduit for Saccard's and Mouret's moneymaking schemes. The new Paris became a place where making money was the primary objective, but Saccard's and Mouret's pursuits are tainted by undertones of extreme violence. This brutality is visited upon Saccard's wife Renée, who experiences it as cognitive and bodily malaise. Her bourgeois degeneracy, a corruption that has flourished in the extreme capitalism of the new Paris, has become so acute that she plumbs the lowest moral depths by beginning a sexual liaison with her stepson. It is at this point that Renée's sickness becomes a moral matter for Zola, so her sickness is transfigured into a natural evil. The significance of Renée's immoral behaviour is signalled by her mirroring with the biblical Eve in the Garden of Eden, when she eats the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is this act which brings evil and mortality to humankind. More generally, drawing on this mythical theme, Zola portrays Haussmann's Paris as a city of sin and lost innocence. Eve's action, her act of moral evil, also establishes original sin, or natural evil, within the human body, so Renée's degenerative sickness becomes comparable to a state of religious sinfulness. The transmutation of sickness into religious sin is further explored in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, where there is again a close link between money, the female body, fever, and

natural evil. In this novel, the bodies of the female customers are subjected to such a degree of violence that they become sacrificial bodies as they deliriously spend their money as shopping fever grips them. However, there is hope within the figure of Denise Baudu who is able to avert the evil, and it is a deed which constitutes a redemption.

i) Fever

The feverish sickness of Renée and the female shoppers in *La Curée* and *Au Bonheur des Dames* could be said to be akin to hysteria, an illness that was mainly thought to affect women in the nineteenth century. Symptoms included paralyses, fainting, coughing fits, convulsions, impressionability, and hypersensitivity to physical and emotional stimulation. However, Jann Matlock describes hysteria as ‘far less the psychiatric name for a set of symptoms than a category for perceptions’.⁸³ She describes hysteria as being part of a ‘nineteenth-century plot of containment’ for women, at the heart of which was a ‘fantasy of uncontrollable and overwhelming desires’ (p. 7). The woman affected by hysteria would suffer bodily convulsions brought on by ‘unchecked engagements with sensation and desire’ (p. 8). In what Matlock terms a ‘poetics of hysteria’ (p. 126), the medical diagnoses of doctors, who were invariably male, turned into political strategies for ‘watching, knowing, and disciplining women of all classes and circumstances’ (p. 337). The bodies of these women were given medical stories that had corollaries in prescriptions for a better society, and their desires were provoked so that they could be channelled and controlled (p. 7). The new profession of doctors called themselves *aliénistes* after the *aliénié(e)s* — or estranged of mind — they treated (p. 130). The use of the concept coincides with the refinement of the clinical relationship in which the *aliéné* is given over to the other, the *aliéniste* (p. 339).

It is likely that Zola was aware of hysteria and may well have been guided by the range of its symptoms in his portrayal of degenerative sickness. However, it is the control of women through this medical discourse that is of most interest here. In particular, the concept of the person afflicted with hysteria being ‘given over’ to the doctor is a good way of understanding the subordinate position of Renée and the women shoppers. They are potential hysterics, ‘estranged of mind’ because they are under the

⁸³ Jann Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction: Prostitution, Hysteria, and Reading Difference in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 3.

control of raging capitalism around them. It is capitalism itself, an economic system controlled by men, that ravages their mind and body.

The febrile nature of capitalism is not only a sickness within the body. In *La Curée*, when Saccard first arrives in Paris, he immediately feels the need to wander the streets, described as ‘ce pavé brûlant d’où il comptait faire jaillir des millions’.⁸⁴ The ‘burning’ pavement, Paris itself, is also prey to the sickness of the bourgeois obsession of making money. Indeed, ‘l’air de Paris le grisait’ (*RM*, I, 360): the sickness is not only physical, but also an intoxication of Saccard’s mind. There is then the possibility that his urge to make enormous amounts of money emanates from a psychiatric disorder. Saccard might thus be considered a male hysteric from this description, being ‘estranged of mind’, and would therefore not be accountable for his own actions. However, the pathological quickly moves to an issue of morality when, after a couple of hours of wandering the streets, he is described as someone ‘qui se promène dans son vice’ (*RM*, I, 360). The streetscape, steeped in the fever of capitalism, is thus also an actual place of sinfulness. Saccard has unequivocally been infected by the fever, which will surely transmute into sin.

It is Napoleon III’s Second Empire regime that has changed Paris into a place of ‘soûlerie furieuse et universelle’, revelling in its ‘folie de jouissance’ (*RM*, I, 367). ‘Drunkenness’ is not the concern for Zola, as it is, for instance, in *L’Assommoir*, but rather it is the ‘madness’ of the regime: whereas the former might be a temporary inebriation, the latter is likely to be terminal, deep-seated and more dangerous.

Saccard is desperate to be part of the buying and selling of land and buildings, transactions which ‘allumait, aux quatre coins de la ville, la bataille des intérêts et le flamboiement du luxe à outrance’ (*RM*, I, 368). Again, the description of this activity as ‘lighting the blaze’ of excessive wealth comes close to the notions of fever and intoxication.

Saccard is part of ‘la grande chasse impériale, la chasse aux aventures, aux femmes, aux millions, [...] la curée chaude dont la ville allait être le théâtre’ (*RM*, I, 362). His desire to make millions and enjoy the accompanying lifestyle suddenly becomes more sinister when the pursuit of money is described as ‘the hot quarry’. This is a hunting term, describing an animal chased by a hunter. At some point in the chase, the animal will be caught and ripped to pieces by hunting dogs. As the title of the novel is *La Curée*, Zola is making the comparison between Saccard’s chase for money and a

84 Émile Zola, ‘La Curée’, in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, ed. by Lanoux and Mitterand, I (1960), 359.

hunt at the end of which there is the violent death inflicted upon an animal.

In her analysis of *La Curée*, Jann Matlock reminds us of the novel's appearance very shortly after the Commune when she writes that the novel 'consorts with phantoms'.⁸⁵ These are the ghosts of the Second Empire summoned up in the text, and which may be perceived from the perspective of the Third Republic during which the first issues of the roman feuilleton were published in autumn 1871 in the republican newspaper *La Cloche*, and then as a full book in January 1872. In interpreting Zola's novel as a deliberation on his country's recent history, Matlock 'interpolates the history of the present as always already part of the tragic past' (p. 329). For Matlock, after the disaster of the *semaine sanglante* of the Paris Commune, the everyday world has been 'occulted' (p. 333) because there had been a 'collective amnesia' in the press about the very fact of the Commune having taken place in the spring of 1871 (p. 331). Matlock observes that *La Curée* must remember that there were two tragedies at the end of the Second Empire: the Franco-Prussian War and the *semaine sanglante* (pp. 345–46). The war against Prussia had made way for a Government of National Defence that looked toward a democratic republic, but the Versaillais war on Paris during the Commune signified state repression in both a literal and proto-psychoanalytical sense. Unfortunately, repression is what republicans like Zola and the journalists at *La Cloche* could not articulate (p. 346). The Versaillais repression had been brutal during the *semaine sanglante*, having left an estimated 25,000 Parisians dead and 38,578 arrested, and had placed Paris in a military 'state of siege'. Tens of thousands of suspected insurgents were held, and the trials of the Communards that began in August 1871 would last for three years. Those accused of leading the revolts were sentenced to hard labour, deportation, or death by firing squad (p. 325).

Matlock notes that during the months of publication of *La Curée*, the question of what caused the 'Second Siege of Paris' was a prominent topic. The title of Zola's novel indicated a 'crisis in meaning' for his contemporaries, as evoking the hunt could only have conjured an echo of the devastation of the Commune. If Napoleon III's government led the hunt, there was also the question of whether the dogs who took the spoils were the speculators, as illustrated in the novel, or the Versaillais. For Matlock, the crisis announced by *La Curée* is of not knowing which point of view to take (p. 327). When the first episode of *La Curée* appeared in *La Cloche*, there was an invitation

85 Jann Matlock, 'Everyday Ghosts: *La Curée* in the Shadow of the Commune', *Romanic Review*, 102 (2011 [2013]), 321–347 (p. 323).

to readers after the end of the text to discover a photographic work showing the city's ruins, *Paris incendié 1871: album historique* (p. 334). Matlock reflects that marketing this work paradoxically served the republican left by showing 'wounds one *could* represent' and attributing them to Napoleon III and his government. By refocusing attention away from the insurgents, *La Cloche* highlighted the responsibility of those who had left Parisans starving and desperate enough to instigate the Commune. Those responsible for the devastation of Paris could, then, be shown to be the Napoleonic Empire, and not the Versailles Government of Defence (pp. 336, 337). In the words of the editor of *La Cloche*, Louis Ulbach, they are the 'spectres' who must be routed if 'les honnêtes gens' are to have a chance at a republic.⁸⁶

The ghostly violence invoked by Matlock is evident in Saccard's attitude to seeking his fortune. Thinking about all the money he can make, 'il lui sembla qu'on le lâchait enfin dans la mêlée, en l'autorisant à égorger les gens, mais légalement, sans trop les faire crier'. Zola uses the verb 'égorger' which has two meanings: 'to cut the throat of' and, secondly, 'to bleed dry' in the financial sense. Both these meanings are equally applicable to Aristide's behaviour in his lucrative deals, and the ruthlessness of his business transactions are not too far removed from the hunting image of death by slaughter. Indeed, Zola describes Aristide himself as the hunter, with 'son instinct de bête affamée' (*RM*, I, 364, 362).

Saccard's speculating is a violent activity for Paris itself. Standing on the Buttes Montmartre with his first wife Angèle overlooking the city, he extends his hand,

ouverte et tranchante comme un coutelas, il fit signe de séparer la ville en quatre parts [...]. Paris haché à coups de sabre, les veines ouvertes, nourrissant cent mille terrassiers et maçons, traversé par d'admirables voies stratégiques qui mettront les forts au cœur des vieux quartiers [...]. Depuis un instant [...] elle s'imaginait entendre [...] de lointains craquements, comme si la main de son mari eût réellement fait les entailles dont il parlait, crevant Paris d'un bout à l'autre, brisant les poutres, écrasant les moellons, laissant derrière elle de longues et affreuses blessures de murs croulants. La petitesse de cette main, s'acharnant sur une proie géante, finissait par inquiéter; et, tandis qu'elle déchirait sans effort les entrailles de l'énorme ville, on eût dit qu'elle prenait un étrange reflet d'acier, dans le crépuscule bleuâtre. (*RM*, I, 389)

An analogy is drawn between the rebuilding of Paris, its beams and walls crumbling across the city, and the death of Paris as an animal hacked to death. As

⁸⁶ Louis Ulbach, 'Les Coquins', *La Cloche*, 6 October 1871, cited in Matlock, 'Everyday Ghosts', p. 337, n. 55).

Saccard's hand, a cutlass, slices the city into four, veins are opened, creating 'gashes', crushing spines, the 'ripping-out' of innards leaving 'hideous injuries'. Paris has become a 'giant prey' for the speculating deals and the subsequent rebuilding of Paris is like the most violent assault on the body. Paris as an animal becomes more than a metaphor because the vocabularies of biology and architecture are interchangeable, one describing the other, and one transmuting into the other. This means that the violence is actual: in the capitalist frenzy, minds are shattered and bodies are being violated and destroyed in the worst way possible. Saccard's bloody vision of demolishing old Paris contrasts sharply with Haussmann's clinical vision of an eternal progress. This barbarous destruction constitutes the reality of making the transition from old to new Paris.

The grand residence in which Saccard lives is also a testament to capitalism. As families of lesser means walk past it, they are able to see

au travers des glaces si larges et si claires qu'elles semblaient, comme les glaces des grands magasins modernes, mises là pour étaler au-dehors le faste intérieur, ces familles de petits bourgeois apercevaient des coins de meubles, des bouts d'étoffes, des morceaux de plafonds d'une richesse éclatante, dont la vue les clouait d'admiration et d'envie au beau milieu des allées. (*RM*, I, 332)

The wide, clear windows are made to display the splendour of the interior, which is 'spread out' to the exterior. The windows are of plate glass, a thick fine-quality glass typically used for store windows, and Zola emphasises this fact. However, despite this seemingly open visual access of the house to the outside world, passers-by are only able to 'glimpse corners, parts and pieces' of the furniture and fabrics, which may actually increase their envy by instilling a desire to see more.

In the Haussmannian city, the commercial aspects of capitalism affect the private residence as much as the department store. The clear windows of both may be compared to those of the arcades which displayed the commodity as pure fetish.⁸⁷ On a larger scale, the World Exhibitions offered the viewers what Walter Benjamin called a pilgrimage to worship the marvels of industry (Cohen, p. 213). The architecture of the World Exhibitions was built from the same glass and iron as the arcades, a structure which glorified 'the exchange value' of the commodity (Cohen, p. 214). The windows of Saccard's residence thus offer a glimpse of his possessions as commodities, whereby

⁸⁷ Margaret Cohen, 'Benjamin's Phantasmagoria: The *Arcades Project*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. by David S. Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 199–220 (p. 212).

the most important thing is that they are on general view.

The exterior of Saccard's residence is no less grand:

L'hôtel disparaissait sous les sculptures. Autour des fenêtres, le long des corniches, couraient des enroulements de rameaux et de fleurs; il y avait des balcons pareils à des corbeilles de verdure, que soutenaient de grandes femmes nues, les hanches tordues, les pointes des seins en avant; puis, çà et là, étaient collés des écussons de fantaisie, des grappes, des roses, toutes les efflorescences possibles de la pierre et du marbre. A mesure que l'œil montait, l'hôtel fleurissait davantage. Autour du toit, régnait une balustrade sur laquelle étaient posées, de distance en distance, des urnes où des flammes de pierre flambaient. Et là, entre les œils-de-bœuf des mansardes, qui s'ouvraient dans un fouillis incroyable de fruits et de feuillages, s'épanouissaient les pièces capitales de cette décoration étonnante, les frontons des pavillons, au milieu desquels reparaissaient les grandes femmes nues, jouant avec des pommes, prenant des poses. (*RM*, I, 331)

The mansion 'disappears' under all the ornate sculptures of flowers, grapes and foliage. However, among this proliferation of flora there are sculptures of nude women with their hips 'twisted' and playing with apples. This image is reminiscent of the figure of the biblical Eve in the Garden of Eden, eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. For Christianity, it is this act which instigates the perpetuation of original sin for humanity, therefore the sculptures of women holding apples suggests a fall from grace and the shift towards evil. As there are many residences built in the same style, the Haussmannian city has become a site of lost innocence and a place of sin.

It is in this degenerate atmosphere that Saccard's wife Renée must live. From the moment she is betrothed to him, she suffers from mental and physical malaise. Her sickness is induced by the wealth gained from Saccard's immoral speculating ventures. However, just as the capitalist fever permeating the very foundations of Paris transforms into the presence of evil, Renée's bodily malaise may also be interpreted as natural evil, or Christianity's original sin.

Renée's status as a woman in the novel means that she is bought and sold like a commodity. While his first wife lays dying, Saccard speaks with his sister Mme Sidonie who is trying to arrange a meeting between him and Renée. The young Renée is pregnant and needs to find a way to avoid scandal. Mme Sidonie, in touch with Renée's aunt, tells Saccard that 'il y a une tante qui ferait un sacrifice', and the transaction is worth 'cent mille francs' (*RM*, I, 375, 376). The word 'sacrifice' is key, as it may be taken in the conventional sense as a loss, or, in French, it can mean 'to give away

merchandise for a knockdown price'.⁸⁸

The new capitalism in which Saccard is revelling is very different from the old money in which Renée grew up. Occasionally, the newly married couple would visit her childhood home which has 'étroites et hautes fenêtres', which is not at all like the windows in her new home with Saccard. The architecture of this house, built around the beginning of the seventeenth century, is 'opaque' in comparison to buildings of the Haussmannian period. Additionally, it is described as set in 'brouillards glacés' in the île Saint-Louis. The iciness here is the opposite of the feverish heat of the streets of Haussmann's Paris. The stillness of the house and its surroundings is striking: it is described as 'une de ces constructions carrées, noires et graves', and it is as if the couple had visited 'une ville morte'. The house's facade, with its 'air vénérable, sa sévérité bourgeoise, dormait solennellement'. Zola is careful to signal the difference between the ruling class of past and present: 'on se serait cru à mille lieues de ce nouveau Paris où flambaient toutes les chaudes jouissances, dans le vacarme des millions'. Whereas the old aristocracy is depicted as drab, cold and lethargic, the new bourgeoisie is part of the new Paris which 'blazed'. It is the fever of sickness which distinguishes new money from old money (*RM*, I, 399, 400).

After Renée's marriage has been negotiated, she finds 'son allure d'écervelée, sa tête folle' (*RM*, I, 385). The 'scatterbrained' nature of her mind is only the beginning of her mental sickness. There is a sharp decline thereafter into a kind of madness and, ultimately, a spiritual fall from grace and total physical breakdown.

The scene at the beginning of the novel hints at Renée's oncoming illness. She is in a carriage with her stepson Maxime, and they are stuck in a stationary throng of carriages in the Bois du Boulogne. She is stretched out 'comme dans une chaise longue de convalescente'. This image of physical incapacity soon changes to one of bored lethargy when Renée rests her head, 'les yeux demi-clos, regardant paresseusement des deux côtés de l'allée, sans voir' (*RM*, I, 319–20, 322).

Maxime comments on Renée's apathy, declaring that she spends more than a hundred thousand francs a year on her appearance, lives in a splendid mansion, is admired for her beauty, and has the world at her feet, yet she is still bored. However, all the pleasures that she has experienced are framed as moral crimes by Zola, and this is made clear when Maxime insists that 'je dirais que tu as mordu à toutes les pommes'

⁸⁸ *Collins-Robert Concise French-English Dictionary*, ed. by Beryl T. Atkins and others (Glasgow: Collins, 1981), p. 343.

(*RM*, I, 325). In living such a lavish life, Maxime has implied that Renée has become the new Eve and that her life is sinful.

Maxime seems to have hit upon an unwelcome truth because Renée, on reaching home, reflects on her present life. She seems dimly aware that Saccard ‘la jetait dans cette vie à outrance, où sa pauvre tête se détraquait un peu plus tous les jours’ (*RM*, I, 334). There is some optimism in the fact that she seems unsettled by her situation:

Renée, troublée par ces pensées de honte et de châtiment, céda aux instincts de vieille et honnête bourgeoisie qui dormaient au fond d’elle; elle promit à la nuit noire de s’amender, de ne plus tant dépenser pour sa toilette, de chercher quelque jeu innocent qui pût la distraire. (*RM*, I, 334)

In Renée’s promise to ‘find some innocent amusement’ to distract her, ‘innocent’ is the crucial word because it means ‘free of evil’, which is something that cannot be said of her husband’s speculating activities. It also underlines the difference between the old aristocracy and the new bourgeoisie, as ‘new money’ is tainted by financial and spiritual corruption.

Hannah Thompson underlines the deviant nature of Renée and Maxime’s incestuous relationship through the image of the flower. She has noted the transgressive desires that occur when there is a confusion of fabric and flesh in Zola’s novels, and it is this which emphasises the unnaturalness of Renée and Maxime’s alliance. Renée herself is described as a flower, and it is her dress, or undress, which helps transform her into a troubling ‘*fille-fleur*’. Maxime, in his role as Narcissus in the *tableaux vivants*, is changed into a flower as he gazes at his own reflection in the pond-mirror.⁸⁹ Thompson stresses the significance of the flower for two reasons: firstly, Renée and Maxime can be seen as doubles of each other in their narcissistic relationship and it is possible to see the blurring of gender differences which separate them. Secondly, their association with flowers links them to the flower imagery of other Zola novels and its connotations, as well as to the aesthetics of Decadence which, in the *Rougon-Macquart*, is centred on references to flowers (pp. 60–61).

Nicholas White also examines the Decadent milieu which is reflected in the novel. He considers the obsessive quest for political legitimization through property and propriety after 1789, which would be achieved through the family.⁹⁰ White writes that

⁸⁹ Hannah Thompson, *Naturalism Redressed: Identity and Clothing in the Novels of Emile Zola* (Oxford: Legenda, 2004), p. 60.

⁹⁰ Nicholas White, *The Family in Crisis in Late Nineteenth-Century French Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 5.

the traditional family may well be viewed as a way of socialising sexual desires (p. 17), even if it meant the ‘closeting’ of female existences (p. 9) in the private domain of the home, while husbands were allowed to roam freely within the public domain. White considers that the desire between Renée and Maxime is a product of a decadent milieu, and explains that Claude Lévi-Strauss’s idea of culture (the taboo) does not suppress nature (Renée and Maxime’s committing of incest) (pp. 110, 111). Continuing with the idea of the constant threat of nature to culture (or incest to the taboo), White compares Renée to one of the plants in her conservatory which represents ‘infinite female desire’ and this makes Renée ‘nature incarnate’ (p. 116) toward which the decadent Maxime regresses. The complete breakdown of this particular family is illustrated in chapter 3 of the novel when Saccard, Maxime and Renée are in Paris, arm in arm, with Maxime in a relationship of sibling familiarity with both parents. White describes this as ‘a crisis of indifferentiation, as the delta of parents and child implodes’ (p. 115). Zola had written in ‘Les Notes générales sur la marche de l’œuvre’ that ‘mon roman eût été impossible avant 1789’ (*RM*, I, 1572), and White observes that this culminates in the symbolic depiction of incest as a rabid dissemination of the political rhetoric of *fraternité* in *La Curée* (p. 115).

Despite Renée’s best intentions, she cannot fight against the degenerative sickness of her environment. The moment of her spiritual downfall happens in her conservatory, after which she embarks on an affair with her stepson. It is filled with many exotic plants, and the place could be another reminder of the Garden of Eden where Eve established original sin for humanity. However, compared to the sculptures carved on the exterior of the mansion, the conservatory’s similarity to Eden seems much more menacing. The novel’s description of it is also very like that of le Paradou in *La Faute de l’abbé Mouret*, where Albine is drawn and ultimately dies. The broad crimson flowers of a large hibiscus are described as ‘bouches sensuelles de femmes qui s’ouvraient, les lèvres rouges, molles et humides, de quelque Messaline géante, que des baisers meurtrissaient, et qui toujours renaissaient avec leur sourire avide et saignant’. The Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden led to the introduction of human sexuality, and it is in the conservatory that Renée has the first glimmerings of her own sensuality. The hibiscus flowers, like ‘women’s mouths, red, soft and moist’, seem to directly mirror this change in Renée. The exterior sculptures of nude women on Renée’s mansion already alluded to the Garden of Eden, but the hibiscus plant adds a second reference as it ‘couvrait tout le flanc de l’hôtel, auquel la serre était scellée’. The flowers, as

representations of sexuality, cover one side of the conservatory, so this becomes a site where Renée's own sexuality begins to emerge. However, the 'bleeding' smile of the flowers also carries the threat of bodily harm (*RM*, I, 356).

Renée's presence in the conservatory has a physical effect on her:

Maintenant un désir net, aigu, l'emplissait. Un amour immense, un besoin de volupté, flottait dans cette nef close, où bouillait la sève ardente des tropiques. La jeune femme était prise dans ces noces puissantes de la terre, qui engendraient autour d'elle ces verdure noires, ces tiges colossales; et les couches âcres de cette mer de feu, cet épanouissement de forêt, ce tas de végétations, toutes brûlantes des entrailles qui les nourrissaient, lui jetaient des effluves troublants, chargés d'ivresse. (*RM*, I, 357)

Renée is filled with a 'clear desire' to embrace her sexuality, which is in stark contrast to her lethargy in the carriage at the beginning of the novel. The environment in the conservatory is febrile with the 'burning, boiling sap' of the plants. There is horticultural accuracy in heat coming from the hotbeds, which is a bed of earth heated by fermenting manure used for growing plants. These hotbeds create the luscious vegetation, which is a 'sea of fire'. It is a scene of primitive nature within the modern city. Its heated atmosphere infects Renée with its 'drunkenness', but just as the heat of the Parisian streetscape turns into the presence of evil, the heat of the conservatory presages profound immorality.

The heat of the conservatory is overwhelming Renée:

Un parfum indéfinissable, fort, excitant, traînait, fait de mille parfums: sueurs humaines, haleines de femmes, senteurs de chevelures; et des souffles doux et fades jusqu'à l'évanouissement, étaient coupés par des souffles pestilentiels, rudes, chargés de poisons [...]. Dans sa robe de satin vert, la gorge et la tête rougissantes, mouillées des gouttes claires de ses diamants, elle ressemblait à une grande fleur, rose et verte, à un des Nymphéa du bassin, pâmé par la chaleur. A cette heure de vision nette, toutes ses bonnes résolutions s'évanouissaient à jamais, l'ivresse du dîner remontait à sa tête, impérieuse, victorieuse, doublée par les flammes de la serre. Elle ne songeait plus aux fraîcheurs de la nuit qui l'avaient calmée, à ces ombres murmurantes du parc, dont les voix lui avaient conseillé la paix heureuse. Ses sens de femme ardente, ses caprices de femme blasée s'éveillaient. Et, au-dessus d'elle, le grand Sphinx de marbre noir riait d'un rire mystérieux, comme s'il avait lu le désir enfin formulé qui galvanisait ce cœur mort, le désir longtemps fuyant, 'l'autre chose' vainement cherchée par Renée dans le bercement de sa calèche. (*RM*, I, 357–58)

The scent of human sweat and women's breath, the 'perfume' of the conservatory,

conjures the image of the oncoming evil chasing Renée, who has been transformed into a human quarry. This is interspersed with the ‘pestilential breath, loaded with poison’ of the plants: this brings the evil back to a biological hazard as the ‘pestilence’ of the conservatory has the capacity to infect Renée with its poison. However, it seems that Renée has been infected because she resembles a flower, and thus has become part of the conservatory. The ‘drunkenness’ of dinner, combined with the ‘flames’ of the conservatory, has gone to her head. She is no longer calm, but is instead an ‘impassioned’ woman because her ‘blazing feminine whims have been awakened’. Desire has galvanised Renée’s ‘dead heart’, and it is a call to action to commit the evil of having an affair with her stepson. At this moral juncture, having been initiated into evil, Renée experiences ‘this time of clear vision’. She has now fully moved from her old bourgeois identity, which is linked with inky darkness and lifelessness, to her new bourgeois life, completely corrupted, and blazing with the heat and light of this burning degeneracy.

Zola shifts Renée’s sickness from the purely physical to the realm of the moral and the spiritual. It is as if she is in a dream,

devant laquelle se dressait, avec l’appel du vertige, une jouissance inconnue, chaude de crime, plus âpre que toutes celles qu’elle avait déjà épuisées, la dernière qu’elle eût encore à boire. Elle n’était plus lasse. L’arbuste derrière lequel elle se cachait à demi, était une plante maudite, un Tanghin de Madagascar, aux larges feuilles de buis, aux tiges blanchâtres, dont les moindres nervures distillent un lait empoisonné [...]. Renée, l’esprit perdu, la bouche sèche et irritée, prit entre ses lèvres un rameau du Tanghin, qui lui venait à la hauteur des dents, et mordit une des feuilles amères. (*RM*, I, 358)

The pleasure to come, that of her coming liaison with Maxime, is ‘hot with crime’ because it plunges the lowest depth of immorality. However, Renée’s desire is tainted by a feeling of ‘vertigo’, which is the sensation of whirling and loss of balance. Again, Zola brings Renée’s degeneration back to the level of biology, so Renée’s new desire may be wholly caused by an infection from degenerate capitalism rather than any kind of self-determination. She seems to have fully turned to evil because she is ‘no longer tired’; the feverishness has animated her. Zola makes clear the full import of Renée’s metamorphosis when she bites the leaf of the ‘cursed plant’. This is an allusion to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil from which Eve took the fruit. At the point of Renée’s biting of the leaf, this is when her innocence is lost and sin is established. She has ‘lost her mind’, and Zola uses the word ‘esprit’ to denote that Renée has lost her

reason, but in French it means ‘spirit’ as well, so the reader can also take it that her soul has been lost. Renée’s degeneracy is such that she has lost the ability to reason, but, more crucially, Zola emphasises her spiritual damnation.

ii) From fever to sin

From this point on, Zola’s use of illness and fever to equate the extreme capitalism of the Second Empire with degeneration and sinfulness is made more evident. After Renée and Maxime have their first sexual encounter, she exclaims that what they did was vile ‘d’une voix profonde, comme si toute l’honnêteté bourgeoise des Béraud Du Châtel s’éveillait dans cette faute suprême’ (*RM*, I, 457). Renée’s past life as a member of the old bourgeoisie, with its apparently stronger sense of morality, momentarily surfaces in her condemnation of the act as a ‘supreme sin’. It is couched in the language of Christianity, which offers a binary choice of the act being either moral or immoral, or good or sinful. If the act is a sinful one, as Renée knows it to be, then it is also an act of evil.

As their relationship progresses, Zola describes the immoral foundations of it as equally based on sickness and evil, and the two terms become almost interchangeable. Zola writes that ‘l’acte brutal’ was the culmination of ‘cette inconsciente maladie d’amour’. Their coupling was due to a denaturing of the idea of love, a diseased version of it. However, it is also described as ‘leur faute’, underlining the immoral nature of it, and also as a sin which has bloomed ‘sur un fumier gras de sucres équivoques’. The sin has directly grown from the febrile nature of modern Paris, which is a hotbed of vice and which is symbolised by Renée’s conservatory. For Zola, the moral core is of the most importance, so the interchangeability of sickness and sin needs to once again be differentiated. He writes that Renée and Maxime felt ‘vaguement coupables’, and it is the presence of guilt which is a marker of their sinfulness. However, they only feel their guilt ‘slightly’, perhaps demonstrating their lack of self-awareness. But Zola strikes at the heart of the matter when he describes the act as ‘ce péché originel’, which is a clear reference to the biblical Fall of Man and its consequence of natural evil being innate in the human body (*RM*, I, 481).

This natural evil then becomes a physiological, degenerative sickness within the Second Empire. The corruption of morals in this atmosphere of extreme capitalism

becomes the norm, and Renée is described as

l'incestueuse [qui] s'habitue à sa faute, comme à une robe de gala, dont les roideurs l'auraient d'abord gênée. Elle suivait les modes de l'époque, elle s'habillait et se déshabillait à l'exemple des autres [...]. Le mal devenait un luxe, une fleur piquée dans les cheveux, un diamant attaché sur le front. (*RM*, I, 510–11, 511)

As everyone else around Renée has a relaxed moral attitude, she becomes 'used to her sin'. The state of sinfulness, as prescribed by Christianity, no longer becomes an issue as it is a prerequisite of living in the corrupted Second Empire. Renée's sin becomes a garment, one of her sumptuous dresses, so sin becomes one of the fashions of the bourgeoisie. The establishment of the department store, as will be discussed in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, is a part of the rise of capitalism, so the 'fashion' of sinfulness leads it to being a 'luxury' or women's accessory. Sinfulness is turned into a commodity, a piece of merchandise for sale, which is desired and worn by women, whether it be a simple flower in the hair or a diamond on the forehead. It also means that these adornments are a manifestation of evil, particularly the flower which is a reminder of Renée's conservatory where she finally lost her innocence.

In the same way that women's accessories are the materialisation of sin, the natural evil and sickness within Renée eventually becomes a visible thing. After Renée argues with Maxime when he plans to marry someone else, this scene also being witnessed by Renée's husband, she feels desperate:

Quand elle rouvrit les yeux, elle s'approcha de la glace, se regarda encore, s'examina de près. Elle était finie. Elle se vit morte. Toute sa face lui disait que le craquement cérébral s'achevait. Maxime, cette perversion dernière de ses sens, avait terminé son œuvre, épuisé sa chair, détraqué son intelligence. (*RM*, I, 576)

In the mirror, Renée is able to see her 'mental crack', which is the natural evil running as a physiological seam of sickness through her body. However, this physical evil is simultaneously a mental disorder as she experiences a 'perversion of her senses' and the 'unhinging' of her mind. It illustrates the relationship between moral and physical degeneracy, which Nordau highlighted in his degeneration theory.

At the end of the novel, Renée dies of meningitis (*RM*, I, 599), which is an inflammation of the meninges caused by viral or bacterial infection. As well as fever, the symptoms include an intense headache, sensitivity to light, and muscular rigidity, leading to convulsions, delirium, and death. This is the complete breakdown of her body

from the sickness of degeneration.

iii) The sacrificial woman

The bourgeois degenerative sickness that ultimately kills Renée in *La Curée* is also prevalent within the female shoppers in *Au Bonheur des Dames*. They experience an all-consuming desire to buy from Octave Mouret's department store, and it is expressed as a fever and a kind of hysteria. In the same way that this sickness is also a natural evil in *La Curée*, the women shoppers are affected by evil. The manufacture of female desire is a malevolence deliberately perpetrated by Mouret, and it violates the minds and bodies of these women. It is not merely a figurative violence, but actual bodily violence. It is from the violated bodies of these women that Mouret makes his vast fortune, so these women should be regarded as sacrificial women.

The fundamental savagery underlying Mouret's business approach towards his female shoppers should, I propose, be looked upon as a literal sacrifice of the women. Jesse Goldhammer describes sacrifice as a subcategory of violence, and etymologically an act that renders holy or sacred (p. 12). The sacred is a mechanism that is needed to legitimate political authority in modern times (p. 4), and it is thus essential for the sovereignty that Mouret wishes to hold over the women. Goldhammer observes that ritual sacrifice expresses the rigidity and hierarchy of the social order that it serves (p. 13), and is a powerful device for both the disruption and demarcation of time and space, bounding notions which mark the beginning, end and scope of authority (p. 16). In order for Mouret to make his excessive profits, it is vital that he has absolute power over the shoppers in his department store.

The department store itself is a beacon of the Second Empire. Denise Baudu, who has just arrived in Paris from the provinces, is captivated by the building. She approaches it, 'attirée de nouveau et comme réchauffée à ce foyer d'ardente lumière. La machine ronflait toujours, encore en activité, lâchant sa vapeur dans un dernier grondement'.⁹¹ The feverish white heat of capitalism occupies its very structure, throwing out light and heat onto the street. It is a 'roaring machine', which describes its brutal efficiency in making money.

⁹¹ Émile Zola, 'Au Bonheur des Dames', in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, ed. by Lanoux and Mitterand, III (1964), 414.

Just as the carved figures of nude women on the exterior of Renée's mansion are graphic reminders of Eve in the Garden of Eden heralding the origin of evil, there are similar representations above the main entrance of the department store. There are 'deux figures allégoriques, deux femmes riantes, la gorge nue et renversée, déroulaient l'enseigne: *Au Bonheur des Dames*' (RM, III, 390). The female figures, 'laughing' and with the throat 'thrown back', initially convey the image of delight and well-being for women that Mouret would like to project. It is, however, merely a prelude to the uncontrollable state that women shoppers will suffer once they have entered inside. The store sign promises *bonheur*, or 'happiness', but this soon turns to *malheur* because of Mouret's deeply immoral commercial tactics. The complete violation of the women shoppers — mentally and physically — means that the *malheur* they undergo is more akin to being touched by evil.

Mouret depends on his women customers to buy in great quantities in order to maintain his excessive profits. His sales technique is to offer a bewildering profusion of clothes and accessories in the store. One particular window display is of 'des articles de bonneterie vendus pour rien, gants et fichus de laine tricotés, capelines, gilets, tout un étalage d'hiver aux couleurs bariolées, chinées, rayées, avec des taches saignantes de rouge' (RM, III, 390–91). Some of the hosiery is 'sold for nothing', which indicates that Mouret is interested in selling items quickly and in great quantities; the very cheap items would tempt the shoppers to buy other more expensive things. The display is of a vast number of different kinds of accessories, all of which are in many colours and styles. However, among the abundance of 'gaily coloured' merchandise, there are some 'bleeding spots of red'. The allusion to blood is very apt as it could very well be that of the women shoppers who end up suffering physical violence at the hands of Mouret. The hosiery 'sold for nothing' is available at a knockdown price, or is a *sacrifice* in French. The women could also be said to be objects of sacrifice because of the physical brutality they suffer as a consequence of the commercial imperative.

The department store specialises in silk wares, and it has exclusive rights to sell 'le Paris-Bonheur et le Cuir d'Or, des articles exceptionnels, qui allaient révolutionner le commerce des nouveautés' (RM, III, 391). These two silk products will help sustain Mouret's profits, but for his women shoppers the 'Paris-Bonheur' can only mean 'Paris-Malheur'.

Mouret's great dependence on the violation of women to make money is illustrated by another window display:

La gorge ronde des mannequins gonflait l'étoffe, les hanches fortes exagéraient la finesse de la taille, la tête absente était remplacée par une grande étiquette, piquée avec une épingle dans le molleton rouge du col; tandis que les glaces, aux deux côtés de la vitrine, par un jeu calculé, les reflétaient et les multipliaient sans fin, peuplaient la rue de ces belles femmes à vendre, et qui portaient des prix en gros chiffres, à la place des têtes. (*RM*, III, 392)

The women mannequins have prices in large letters instead of heads, so there is a direct equivalence between women's bodies and capitalism. The large label, 'stabbed with a pin' into the 'red lining of the neck', is as if a real woman has been gored for the sake of selling merchandise. The mirrors on either side of the display 'reflected and multiplied endlessly' this decapitated woman. So it is that there are limitless images of dismembered women being projected into the store and into the street. These disturbing representations of women generate the desire of women shoppers to purchase the finery in which the mannequins are draped, but it seems that the brutalised women beneath the clothes go unnoticed.

The headless mannequins may also be seen as examples of Mouret's sacrificial strategy to demonstrate his authority. Goldhammer writes that revolutionaries during the French Revolution believed that the only way to eradicate royal sovereignty, and to establish their own, was to remove its head. The goal of the Terror and its public guillotining was to purify and preserve the republic through punishment. Violence created a reverential sense of awe, and, as such, it mimicked the moral feelings invoked by sacred events, such as religious activities and ritual ceremonies of state (Goldhammer, pp. 57, 62, 63). It is as if Mouret has reappropriated the sacrificial logic of the Revolution for purely capitalist ends, as opposed to the republican objective of the revolutionaries. Of course, Zola is highlighting his own republican objectives here by alluding to the French Revolutionary imagery.

Zola writes that Mouret's fortune 'était faite de la chair et du sang de la femme', and that he was 'inventeur de cette mécanique à manger les femmes' (*RM*, III, 460, 461). The reality of Mouret's capitalism is that the fashion image — apparently stylish and generating desire — belies the necessary degradation of his women shoppers. His fortune is derived from the 'flesh and blood' of women, which means their being systematically 'eaten' and violated.

The violence that is needed to sustain profits is understood by Mouret himself. After his colleague Bourdoncle warns him that one day a woman will avenge the others,

Mouret brandishes his penholder, 'et il le pointa dans le vide, comme s'il eût voulu percer d'un couteau un cœur invisible' (*RM*, III, 419). The imaginary knife is Mouret's weapon to cut the flesh and blood of women. His desire is to 'vaincre la femme [...] la griser d'attentions galantes et trafiquer de ses désirs, exploiter sa fièvre' (*RM*, III, 612). Mouret's wish to 'intoxicate' his women shoppers and to 'exploit her fever' is to channel the fever of capitalism into her body by infection. The result of this, as Mouret proclaims to Bourdoncle, is 'le beau malheur' (*RM*, III, 425), so the fever suffered by the shoppers transmutes into 'beautiful evil'.

The various displays of merchandise within the department store become progressively more extravagant throughout the novel. One display is of gloves and scarves:

Un étalage aux colorations vives et gaies, d'un effet ravissant. Les comptoirs, rangés symétriquement, semblaient être des plates-bandes, changeaient le hall en un parterre français, où souriait la gamme tendre des fleurs. A nu sur le bois, dans des cartons éventrés, hors des casiers trop pleins, une moisson de foulards mettait le rouge vif des géraniums, le blanc laiteux des pétunias, le jaune d'or des chrysanthèmes, le bleu céleste des verveines; et, plus haut, sur des tiges de cuivre, s'enguirlandait une autre floraison, des fichus jetés, des rubans déroulés, tout un cordon éclatant qui se prolongeait, montait autour des colonnes, se multipliait dans les glaces. (*RM*, III, 621)

The profusion of colours has given the counters the semblance of being 'flower beds'. It is a visual abundance of merchandise, calculated to tempt the women shoppers to buy. However, this image of plenitude is one of evil because it is a fashion image, constructed with the sole intention of selling products. The wicked intent comes to the fore if these flower beds are compared with the flora in Renée's conservatory, which had been growing in hotbeds that are heated by the degenerative fever of modern Paris. This evil image is itself dynamic: firstly, the colours of the scarves suggest different flowers — geraniums, petunias, chrysanthemums — then this transforms into a 'harvest' and 'flowering' of scarves. The fashion display thus becomes a self-perpetuating germination of evil. In addition to this, the scarves are 'multiplied' by the mirrors so that the fashion image is replicated endlessly and projected outwards to the women shoppers. The merchandise itself is also personified as a violated body, as the boxes are described as 'disembowelled'.

This proliferation of the fashion image is what constitutes reality under the commercial imperative. The mirrors in the store distort the real world, and produce

images rooted in evil which stand in for reality. It is a disorientation of the senses and thus of perception, and this is a deliberate tactic used by Mouret in his store. On one occasion Mme de Boves, who is shopping among the mass of umbrellas and red balloons, says, 'On ne sait plus où l'on est' (*RM*, III, 620).

However, just as Renée is able to see her natural evil in the mirror, those in the store are able to make visible the physical denaturing of the women's bodies, which is their true state. One scene describes the crowd of shoppers:

Partout les glaces reculaient les magasins, reflétaient des étalages avec des coins de public, des visages renversés, des moitiés d'épaules et de bras; [...] la foule n'était plus qu'une poussière humaine. (*RM*, III, 627)

The mirrors showing only parts of bodies — 'faces, shoulders, arms' — represent the fragmentation of women's bodies in their dismemberment under the impact of capitalism. Each body part becomes unrecognisable by itself — the 'inverted' face, the 'half' of a shoulder — so the visual distortion represents a physical mutilation. Eventually, the pulverising of the women's bodies is such that they become 'human dust'.

The immorality of Mouret's campaigns culminates in the sale of goods which are white-coloured only. There was 'rien que du blanc, et jamais le même blanc, tous les blancs' and 'une chaleur de serre, suffocante' (*RM*, III, 769, 770). The whiteness is that of the white-hot heat of capitalist fever, and Zola describes the hotness as that of a conservatory. This is a reminder of the site of evil where Renée lost her innocence. The link between flowers and evil is echoed in Mouret's idea of giving small bouquets of white violets to each woman who made a purchase: 'la clientèle se trouvait fleurie [...], toutes les femmes promenaient un parfum pénétrant de fleur' (*RM*, III, 770). The giving of a flower to these women is giving prominence to their being touched by evil. This sale devoted to exclusively white-coloured merchandise lends a superficial air of moral purity to the scene. This sense of innocence is, however, disguising the drive for maximum profit from this promotion. Considering the physical degradation that the women shoppers will have to suffer, it is appropriate to bear in mind the phrase that 'to bleed someone white' is to drain them of their wealth. The shoppers will not only suffer physical harm, but they will also squander all their money.

The fever of the women as they shop in this sea of white leads to the most horrific violation of their bodies:

Mouret regardait toujours son peuple de femmes, au milieu de ces

flamboiements. De longs remous brisaient la cohue, la fièvre de cette journée de grande vente passait comme un vertige, roulant la houle désordonnée des têtes [...]; tandis que la clientèle, dépouillée, violée, s'en allait à moitié défaite, avec la volupté assouvie et la sourde honte d'un désir contenté au fond d'un hôtel louche. C'était lui qui les possédait de la sorte, qui les tenait à sa merci. (*RM*, III, 797)

The shopping frenzy is likened to a 'fever' and 'vertigo', both of which are physical imbalances. The sight of the heads of the many shoppers are described as a 'disorderly swell', but the disorderliness may well also be a muddling of the women's mental faculties as they are affected by the heat of capitalism. Mouret's intention of exploiting these women for their money is so intense that capitalism's underlying violence against women materialises into their physical violation. The fashion image which incites desire in women leads to their mental and physical annihilation.

Hannah Thompson interprets the desire of the women shoppers as a positive feature. She identifies Mouret's department store as the site of 'an alternative economy of female-centred fantasy and desire'.⁹² As it operates beyond the confines of patriarchy and outside of the heterosexual-reproductive model of the nineteenth century, this alternative system is potentially subversive. For Thompson, the women shoppers see in the eroticised displays of female dress the confusion of fabric and flesh, and it is this which presages a transgressive, non-reproductive, non-heterosexual eroticism (p. 83). The shopping trip for the women, exhausted after their purchases, is described by Thompson as a shameful sexual act. They have experienced 'perverse desires', feelings which are more readily applicable to Nana's lesbian relationship with her fellow prostitute Satin (p. 86). Following Teresa de Lauretis's theory of the fetish being a sign for an originally lost object, Thompson describes the female fetishisation of clothing in the novel as the desire to rediscover a lost female body. The images of female-centred desire in the novel are, then, for Thompson, an attempt to counter male attempts to police female sexuality in other Zola novels (p. 87). It is through the figure of the shoplifter Mme de Boves that the women's desire becomes intense in wanting to subvert the male dominant order by 'stealing back' something that has been denied her as a woman (p. 88).

The critic Rachel Bowlby writes of this same manipulation of women and of their consumerist desire. She observes that, in order for Mouret to sustain his profits, the

⁹² Hannah Thompson, "'Une perversion du désir, une névrose nouvelle': Female Sexuality in Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*", *Romance Studies*, 32 (1998), 81–92 (p. 82).

consumer in *Au Bonheur* ‘must be anything but “rational” [and] her “mode” is that of caprice rather than order’.⁹³ In discussing the appointments diaries that the Paris department store *Bon Marché* produced for their clientele, Bowlby observes that the diaries’ contents were a mixture of practical information such as bus timetables and also articles of a light, informative type, not unlike the miscellaneous ‘factual’ features produced for children’s papers (pp. 189, 190). Bowlby concludes that the female reader of the diary is being treated as ‘less a streetwise urban habituée than a potentially unruly infant to be kept amused or occupied’ (p. 190). Additionally, Bowlby sees a parallel between the store and the diary/magazine, both full of items to maintain the ‘distractable attention’ (p. 190) of the reader. Bowlby gives a second, and more menacing, example of control over the female consumer in her discussion of the Paris fashion journal *La Dernière Mode*, of which its eight issues were edited and written in their entirety by the poet Mallarmé during the last part of 1874. Bowlby notes that the imagined life of the reader is depicted as one of distractions and novelties, in which she is forever seeking new things to go and see, look at and buy (p. 196). Under the pseudonym ‘Marguerite de Ponty’, Mallarmé writes that ‘lois, décrets, projets, arrêtés, comme disent les messieurs, tout est maintenant promulgué, pour ce qui est de la mode’ (p. 204). The frivolous nature of fashion is here conceived as a law or decree which has been put into effect by official (male) proclamation. Male control in the world of fashion is further expounded in an article by ‘Ix’, another pseudonym of Mallarmé, who describes ‘une glace, où vous vous reconnaissez [...] ce miroir impartial, toutes vous chercherez la reine de la fête par un regard, qui ira droit à votre image’ (p. 204). Bowlby notes that it is not that the beautiful image is a delusion, but that there can be no woman without the mirror which informs her (p. 198). Bowlby writes that the woman learns to read herself in the form of a perfect mutual reflection of subject and text/mirror image, and it is a masculine law and ‘vision’ which supports this (pp. 200, 201). This masculine control is certainly in evidence in Mouret’s department store, where the mirrors induce the consumerist gaze of his women shoppers.

93 Rachel Bowlby, ‘Modes of Modern Shopping: Mallarmé at the *Bon Marché*’, in *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature and the History of Sexuality*, ed. by Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 185–205 (p. 189).

iv) From *malheur* to *bonheur*

The unlikely figure of Denise Baudu is the woman who is able to save the women shoppers. There is much attention drawn to Denise's hair in the novel. It is 'nouée en grosses tresses, restait sauvage, [et] elle tâchait du moins de se contenir'; Mouret comments that 'ce sont encore ces diablesses de mèches!'. Bourdoncle calls Denise 'la mal peignée'. With her 'wild' and 'devilish' hair, Denise may well be considered to be a nineteenth-century Medusa (*RM*, III, 503, 502).

In Greek mythology, Medusa was a Gorgon, a terrifying female creature. The term commonly refers to any of three sisters who had hair of living, venomous snakes, and a horrifying visage that turned those who beheld it to stone. Traditionally, while two of the Gorgons were immortal, Stheno and Euryale, their sister Medusa was not, and was slain by the mythical demigod and hero Perseus.

Because of their legendary gaze, images of the Gorgons were displayed on objects and buildings for protection. In Ancient Greece a *Gorgoneion* (or stone head, engraving, or drawing of a Gorgon face, often with snakes protruding wildly and the tongue sticking out between her fangs) was frequently used as an apotropaic symbol. It supposedly had the power to ward off evil influences, and were placed on doors, walls, floors, coins, shields, breastplates, and tombstones for this purpose. In this regard *Gorgoneia* are similar to the sometimes grotesque faces on Chinese soldiers' shields, also used generally as an amulet, a protection against the evil eye.⁹⁴

It is the evil-averting gaze of Medusa which could neutralise the desiring gaze of women upon commodities. The hero Perseus was only able to slay Medusa because of a mirrored shield from Athena, a testament to the real danger of her gaze. At the end of the novel, we could consider that Denise-Medusa has won the battle against the evil of commodities. She enters Mouret's office, whereupon she sees a pile of a million francs on his desk. It is at this point that Mouret declares his love for Denise, and, after much indecision, Denise relents. At this point, 'Mouret était tombé assis sur le bureau, dans le million, qu'il ne voyait plus' (*RM*, III, 803). Denise has triumphed as Mouret 'no longer sees' his pile of money. She has broken the hold of the capitalist gaze within Mouret himself. If the gaze no longer covets, then there is hope that the women shoppers will no longer be slaves to their gaze. Denise is the embodiment of redemption for the

⁹⁴ Georgia S. Maas, 'Medusa', in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. by Michael Gagarin and Elaine Fantham, 7 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), I, 388–89.

women shoppers, and this alone may be seen as an end to Mouret's use of sacrificial tactics for commercial gain. Goldhammer notes that redemption refers to sacrifice in both a religious and economic sense, so Mouret's shoppers are delivered from sin as well as being released from the demands of the creditor (Goldhammer, pp. 15, 16).

In the moneymaking frenzy of *La Curée* and *Au Bonheur des Dames*, the bourgeois degenerative sickness of the Second Empire manifests itself as fever. This febrility is part of the fabric of Paris itself, but it also infects the human body. In these two novels, the sickness of capitalist fever invades the bodies of Renée and the women shoppers and unbalances their mental faculties, ultimately leading to their physical annihilation. Renée's sickness leads her to have an illicit relationship with her stepson, and the moment when she bites the poisoned leaf in the conservatory, a modern-day Garden of Eden, is when it precipitates both a mental breakdown and a spiritual fall. At that point, Renée's sickness then becomes natural evil. The fever of the women shoppers, desperate to buy Mouret's products, becomes so acute that the forces of capitalism become a physical assault on the body. Firstly, there is fragmentation and disfigurement, then there is violation and extermination. The violence is not random, but may be seen as ritual sacrifice visited upon the women shoppers. It is a practice that has been deliberately constructed by Mouret to proclaim his authority in the department store. The many allusions to flowers and general flora make the reader aware, by reminding her of the Garden of Eden, that the extreme commercial tactics of the department store are rooted in evil. In both these novels, degenerative sickness and evil are synonymous.

Chapter 4

Religion

The preceding chapters discussed the physiological nature and intersection between degeneration and natural evil. This chapter will focus on natural evil as original sin, which is the Christian and Augustinian definition. It is Eve's eating of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the biblical Garden of Eden that instigates the perpetuation of original sin.

This religious myth is a subject on which Zola focuses in his two *Rougon-Macquart* novels *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* and *Le Docteur Pascal*. In these novels, Zola ironises the biblical story with his naturalistic treatment of the nature of this evil. Thus, in *La Faute*, the fifth volume of the *Rougon-Macquart* series, published in 1875, the figures of Adam and Eve are replaced by the fallen Catholic priest abbé Mouret and Albine the child of nature, and the Garden of Eden is transformed into the Naturalist park le Paradou. The tension within the novel is that between Christianity and Naturalism: religion defines humanity as tainted with the myth of original sin, and Zola's Naturalism transforms original sin into an illness which may be cured. In the novel, Zola mocks and lambasts religion for this burden on humanity. However, by the time that *Le Docteur Pascal* is published eighteen years later in 1893, the twentieth and final instalment of the *Rougon-Macquart*, Zola seems to have moved on from deliberately targeting religion and, instead, has the confidence to focus wholly on his myth of 'life' as the Naturalist alternative to Christianity. For Zola, life constitutes the physical and the physiological dimension of humanity, and is the quality that will ultimately confer eternal life on the human race. Whereas Christianity promises eternal life after death, Zola's Naturalism pledges eternal life for humanity which constantly renews itself with each generation that passes. The later novel tackles the same issues that concern religion — the nature of man and evil — but it is science and Naturalism which now provide the way forward from the conundrum of original sin presented by Christianity. As such, Zola's Naturalism proposes a powerful argument that opposes degeneration theorists such as Nordau in its organic advancement of humanity. However, despite Zola's modern approach, this chapter will show that he cannot dispense with religion in discussing the nature of man and the concept of evil.

i) *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret*

The Christian phenomenon of original sin is central to Zola's novel *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret*. It is the story of the young abbé Mouret who has an extreme aversion to the material world and to his own body because Christianity deems the body to be the vehicle of original sin. As the biblical Book of Genesis recounts the Fall of Man and the establishing of original sin when Adam and Eve come together in sexual union, Mouret feels he must shun the material in order to be able to fulfil his religious commitments which must be conducted on a metaphysical level at all times.

This chapter explores this need for the separation of the material and the metaphysical within *La Faute*. As a Naturalist writer Zola focuses on the material world, and therefore all things must be expressed in terms of the physical. In the preface to the first *Rougon-Macquart* novel *La Fortune des Rougon*, Zola writes that he proposes to study the Rougon-Macquart family whose overflowing of appetites are displayed 'physiologiquement, ils sont la lente succession des accidents nerveux et sanguins qui se déclarent dans une race, à la suite d'une première lésion organique' (*RM*, I, 3). However, this is not to say that writing about the metaphysical is out of bounds for Zola. Original sin may be seen as a kind of religious mythology to which believers subscribe: Adam and Eve are the instigators of the legacy of the new world of the Fallen Man, a belief which is still current in Western society today. This chapter will discuss how Zola shows that original sin is both a moral and a natural evil: the behaviour of individuals is a moral issue, which manifests itself through suffering. Zola echoes the Augustinian tradition, whereby moral evil is the evil which we commit, and natural evil is that which we endure as a punishment for moral evil. It is, however, through the concept of the *fêlure* that Zola is able to establish a secular, Naturalist version of original sin. The *fêlure* manifests itself as a deathly, physiological seam of evil in Zola's novels, but it is in this novel that its materiality is reversed. The deathly nature then becomes invalidated, and the body is suffused with life rather than condemned by death.

Although the Second Empire of the *Rougon-Macquart* novels is a modern, capitalist society, *La Faute* demonstrates that belief in original sin is still prevalent. The notions of good and evil embodied by Christianity still have a presence in a modern society, particularly a French society steeped in Catholicism. To help explore this further, it will be necessary to turn to the ideas of Elias Canetti and Paul Ricœur. The

establishing of original sin lies with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and all humans are supposedly tainted with it henceforth. If Adam and Eve were the first humans, then original sin may be seen as inherent in the human condition: to be human means to be tainted with original sin. Although Canetti does not deal directly with original sin specifically, his writing on how the body is seen by ‘primitive’ tribes is valuable because it is seen as a carrier of evil, and this evil is an illness. The tribes believe this evil to be a grudge from the dead, yet also an illness of the body, albeit one created by the spirits; it has simultaneously a physical and metaphysical nature (Canetti, pp. 291–92). Ricœur, however, writes about evil in the context of a modern society, which is historically relevant to Zola’s *Rougon-Macquart*. Ricœur writes of the ‘fault-line’ in man, the weakness of being comprised of soul and body as a totality which creates the possibility of moral evil.⁹⁵ Ricœur’s fault line has a striking similarity to Zola’s *fêlure*. More specifically for *La Faute*, Ricœur writes of confession as being man’s behaviour relating to fault (Simms, p. 21), so that evil does not become evil until the possibility of confessing it arises to consciousness. In *La Faute*, Zola presents the situation of abbé Mouret suffering from amnesia and forgetting his religious commitments, which allows him the liberty to enjoy his physical body which would not be permitted otherwise. Ricœur considers that if an individual no longer believes that God will punish him, then that is the way out of the ‘cycle de la rétribution’.⁹⁶ In allowing abbé Mouret a way out of his religious persona through amnesia, Zola is similarly giving Mouret a way out of the cycle of believing he will be punished and will thus finally be free of original sin.

This chapter will examine the text of *La Faute* in relation to Canetti’s and Ricœur’s theories. Firstly, original sin will be framed as an evil associated with the human body, whether that be as Ricœur’s ‘fault-line’, as illness suffered by a member of the ‘primitive’ tribes highlighted by Canetti, or as Zola’s *fêlure*. The consciousness of evil, the ability to recognise such a concept, will then be examined in the contrast between the behaviour of abbé Mouret and that of his Naturalist alter ego Serge. Secondly, the chapter will also study Zola’s Naturalist alternatives to Christianity’s symbols of original sin.

The relationship between original sin, illness, and the body in *La Faute* is further developed in the discussion of the second novel *Le Docteur Pascal* in which science is

95 Karl Simms, *Paul Ricœur* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 15–16.

96 Paul Ricœur, *Le Mal: un défi à la philosophie et à la théologie*, 3rd edn (Geneva: Editions Labor et Fides, 2004), p. 65.

presented as the potential saviour of humanity. The titular Docteur Pascal has spent years researching heredity, and creates the equivalent of a magic potion or a universal panacea to alleviate the physical suffering of his patients. His mission is to cure humanity, and it is this drive to ‘perfect’ the human race by eradicating suffering, or natural evil, which elevates Pascal to the status of a Naturalistic Christ figure. The novel employs Christianity’s own symbols surrounding original sin and naturalises them: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the concept of eternal life are given Naturalistic alternatives. Zola thus takes traditional Christian concepts and undermines and ironises them, creating them anew as Naturalistic myths.

At this point, it is beneficial to consider the cultural background of France in the eighteen years between the publication of the two novels. It is important to understand why Zola might want to write about the Christian definition of good and evil, and health and renewal in the new age of science. After the disastrous Franco-Prussian War in 1870, France had to reassess itself as a weaker nation. Its social problems became recognised as pathologies and, in combination with the notion of *degenerescence* as a social question by the 1890s, it is possible to see why Zola might use metaphors of illness and cure in his work. Moreover, he was writing at a time when society was witnessing the growing ascendancy of science over religion. Philippe Muray describes the nineteenth century’s ‘programme du vouloir-guérir’,⁹⁷ which was an ideological apparatus against Catholicism. In addition, according to the Positivist world view advanced by Auguste Comte, humanity had passed through the theological and metaphysical phases in its intellectual development and then had reached maturity in the positive phase when it had abandoned religion entirely. No longer crediting a supernatural agency for the phenomena he witnessed, man had ceased to look for causes and had limited himself to registering ‘observable facts’.⁹⁸ Yet, Zola’s writing takes care to acknowledge the importance of the mythical elements that religion offered to believers because it is this that makes the core of what it is to be human. Christian myth revolves around life, death, and evil, and these ontological principles go to the heart of every human society. Zola’s Naturalism, as this chapter will show, is not a dry alternative to religion, but an engagement with the mythical imagination. The mythical status of Christianity’s original sin is as much an enslavement of the mind and imagination as of the body, so it is crucial that Zola counters and undermines the

97 Philippe Muray, *Le 19e siècle à travers les âges* (Paris: Denoël, 1984), p. 83.

98 Robert Ziegler, *Satanism, Magic and Mysticism in Fin-de-siècle France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 196–97.

overwhelming power of the Christian myth with his own Naturalistic myths.

ii) The body as the site of evil

The equation between illness and evil as described by Canetti in the beliefs of the Australian Aranda tribe provides a fruitful parallel with Zola's *fêlure*, but is especially apt when considered in relation to *La Faute*. An Aranda medicine man who works from his knowledge of bodily processes has to undergo special operations on his own body before he is allowed to practise his profession. He goes to the mouth of the cave where the spirits dwell. Here, his tongue is perforated by a lance thrown at him by one of the spirits. Later, as he believes, a second spear pierces his head ear to ear. He falls dead and is carried by the spirits into the cave where they live. He is unconscious, but in that other world all his internal organs are removed and replaced with a completely new set, either invulnerable or less susceptible to the assaults of magic. He is strengthened for his role from within: his new power originates in his intestines. The medicine man is provided by the spirits with small crystals. The magician gives them to his patient and draws them out again from the afflicted parts of the latter's body: hard particles of foreign matter in the patient's body have caused his illness. Any Aranda can use sorcery to harm individuals, Canetti concludes, but only a medicine man can ward off evil; through initiation and practice he is better protected than others (Canetti, pp. 290–91).

In this description of the initiation of the Aranda medicine man, the body is weak in its pre-initiation stage and strong afterwards, so that it is able to combat evil in the guise of illness. The initiation is not merely a ritual, but a potent mixture of the metaphysical, the physical, and the mythical, resulting in a transformation of the internal organs which are able to repel black magic. This strengthening of the body occurs 'in that other world' belonging to the spirits, so the medicine man moves between the threshold dividing this world and the spirit world, between the realms of the physical and the metaphysical, the conscious and the unconscious. There is a physical version of the medicine man, with weak organs, and a mythical-metaphysical version of him, with strengthened organs. The movement between the physical and the metaphysical is closely linked: evil in the guise of illness in the patient is visible as hard particles of foreign matter. From the example of the Aranda medicine man, it is possible that evil can be extracted from the body because it is a physical thing. The extracted evil

is in a material form, and a person who carries the evil in his body can be ‘cured’ of it.

The ‘curing’ of evil for Ricœur, however, would seem to be an impossibility. He believes in original sin which came from the biblical myth of Adam and Eve eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. This catastrophic act brought about the Fall of Man, so that all future generations of humanity would be afflicted by original sin. It was an act loaded with moral significance because the moral evil caused the existence of natural evil in the world. As in the case of the Aranda medicine man, original sin is an evil of the body, and Ricœur views it as a fault running through man’s existence, like a fault line in the geological sense. This fracturing between the willing soul and the involuntary passions is a weakness inherent in the constitution of man himself, and is the weakness of being comprised of soul and body as a totality. The fallible nature of this existence is, for Ricœur, what allows the possibility of moral evil. Fallibility, or the possibility of fault, of rupture between the soul and the passions, means the possibility of succumbing to the temptations which the passions present (Simms, pp. 15–16).

For humanity, breaking the vicious circle of original sin is difficult. Ricœur makes this clear: man’s physical constitution means that he has an inherent fault line, and of course ‘la faute fait l’homme coupable’ (Ricœur, p. 23). Moreover, in Ricœur’s description of ‘le stade de la sagesse’, humanity’s need to explain why the human condition is as it is means that myth must change register, as it is no longer enough to *tell* the origins of evil, but it must explain *how* and *why* the human condition is at its present state. This ‘stage of wisdom’ offers the theory of retribution, where ‘toute souffrance est méritée parce qu’elle est la punition d’un péché individuel ou collectif, connu ou inconnu’ (Ricœur, p. 30). This burden of evil is amplified when Augustine, who established the moral polarities of sin and suffering and the theory of retribution in Western thought, expands the idea of sin to a collective state, rather than just an individual one, and established a link between Adam and the rest of mankind. This is what Ricœur calls ‘une gnose anti-gnostique’: Augustine denies Gnosticism (evil is not a substance, but an act), yet re-affirms it as ‘[une] puissance démonique déjà là’ (Ricœur, p. 37). Therefore, for those who believe in original sin, they are, individually, in a constant state of fallibility because they are composed of soul and body, but they also live, collectively, within a ‘deserved’ state of retribution for an unknown sin. To justify the suffering, the sin had to be made more serious, so it became a universal sin.

Evil as an illness, and the curing of it, described by Canetti of the Aranda

medicine man is a concept and process which is realised in *La Faute*. Abbé Mouret suffers amnesia, and this ‘forgetting’ allows him to become Serge in le Paradou, or the Naturalistic Adam in the Garden of Eden. The transformed Serge is the polar opposite of abbé Mouret. Mouret is physically and mentally ‘re-born’ as Serge because his new identity allows him to enjoy a re-vitalised body and break his vow of chastity, things which are forbidden to Mouret as a Catholic priest. Mouret’s previous denial of his body was necessary because it is the physical human body which Christianity has deemed to be the site of evil and carrier of original sin. Ricœur’s theory of the body implying fallibility supports this. Yet, Zola’s treatment of Mouret’s original sin in a Naturalist context may offer the possibility of cure by turning it into a bodily illness. Zola’s Naturalism also treats the bodily passions as a triumph of healthy humanity, so the Christian notion of evil and original sin would not even register in this new context.

The body in *La Faute*, and particularly that of Mouret, is central to the text. The Naturalist Zola is able to discuss original sin as a *fêlure*, and he turns a usually metaphysical concept into a material substance by using the vehicle of Mouret’s body. Canetti’s concept of evil as illness translates into the original sin of Mouret, so that illness is not merely a physiological imbalance, but also a material evil, and not just the symbol of evil. This literalness is equally applicable to Ricœur’s concept of the willing soul and the involuntary passions, as is exemplified by the duality of Mouret and Serge. This duality is also a good device for Zola to question the idea of evil posited by the Church: what Mouret believes to be evil is a force for good for Serge. What is more interesting is how Mouret behaves in his post-innocent state, after he has ‘become’ Serge, and then reverted back to being Mouret the priest. Because he has experienced life beyond the confines of being a priest, he sees that what the Church has deemed evil is not necessarily so. In *La Faute*, Zola ironises evil as it is defined by Christianity. Zola gives it a Naturalistic dimension, which therefore places it into the worldly realm.

Janet L. Beizer examines Zola’s anxiety about difference and how it manifests itself within *La Faute de l’abbé Mouret*. For Zola, these differences generally take many forms: the sexual (phantasms of castration, androgyny, and incest); the intratextual (the need to vary the novels within the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle); and the intertextual (a compulsion to distinguish himself from his predecessors, illustrated by his *Différences entre Balzac et moi*).⁹⁹ Beizer considers that Zola’s need to establish difference came

⁹⁹ Janet L. Beizer, ‘This Is Not a Source Study: Zola, Genesis, and *La Faute de l’abbé Mouret*’, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 18 (1989–90), 186–95 (p. 192).

from his wanting to ‘recreate [his] patronym’. His *Rougon-Macquart* project was consequently a repetition and redefinition of both his father’s activities as an engineer and his father’s name (p. 193). Within *La Faute*, Beizer observes that the peasant clan of les Artaud is the epitome of sameness, whom Zola described as ‘innommé, une masse’. For Beizer, this amorphous group, which has a minimal presence in the novel, constitutes a *mise en abyme* of the Rougon-Macquart family and of Zola’s recurring confrontation with the problem of telling the difference (p. 188). Beizer notes that it cannot be a coincidence that the incestuous Artaud clan are in the same novel as Serge Mouret, who is the offspring from the union of a Rougon and a Macquart cousin (pp. 188–89). It is the *arbre généalogique*, in Beizer’s view, that would seem to separate the Rougon-Macquarts from the incestuous fate of the Artauds. This family tree involves the ‘painstaking labor of naming, classifying, separating, differentiating’, and it is Zola’s mission in the novel, and more generally, to maintain the distinction between the Rougon-Macquarts and the Artauds: ‘to oppose form to formlessness’ (p. 189). It is through her reading of *La Faute* through the prism of difference that Beizer proposes an ‘intertextual displacement’ of the novel by refocusing from the Eden episode (Genesis 2 and 3) to the first chapter of Genesis which tells the stories of the creation of the world. In the biblical account of creation, there is separation and definition of the waters and the earth, and night and day. The *Ébauche* for the novel emphasised the process of gradual differentiation of the main characters from an inchoate mass. For Beizer, implementing his idea from the *Ébauche* would mean that Zola becomes God the Father or, borrowing from Foucault, ‘celui qui sépare’. The middle section of the novel follows the differentiation principle of Genesis 2 and 3, as human life is distinguished from plant and animal life, and Serge and Albine are distinct against the backdrop of the Paradou plants and beasts (p. 190). The Artaud clan represents a breakdown in Zola’s differentiating impulse, or ‘the realization of his worst fears’, and Beizer suggests that, having been represented, the threat posed by these creatures is circumscribed and can thus be displaced and ‘marginalized’ (p. 192).

At the beginning of *La Faute*, Mouret is conducting Mass. Throughout the narration of this Catholic ceremony, Zola includes many instances of irony whereby religious custom is undermined and naturalised. The ceremony itself represents Christ’s crucifixion, which was the ultimate sacrifice to save humanity from sin. Mouret crosses himself, in the customary Catholic fashion:

Le prêtre, après avoir fait un signe de croix sur le Missel, s’était signé lui-

même au front, pour dire qu'il ne rougirait jamais de la parole divine; sur la bouche, pour montrer qu'il était toujours prêt à confesser sa foi; sur son cœur, pour indiquer que son cœur appartenait à Dieu seul. (*RM*, I, 1221)

Mouret's crossing of himself consists in touching his forehead, his mouth, then his heart, and doing so is acknowledgment that God is his only saviour from evil. Each of the three actions symbolises God's omnipotence: the 'divine word' is God's, and St John's Gospel declares that 'In the beginning was the Word [...] and the Word was God', so God is acknowledged as the Creator in the touching of the forehead; the touching of the mouth indicates the great importance of the confessing of sin, as it is only God who can absolve the individual of sin; and the touching of the heart signifies the individual's belonging to God. Sin itself is shown to be physical matter when Mouret pours water on the thumb and index finger of each hand 'afin de se purifier des moindres taches du péché' (*RM*, I, 1222).

After Mass has taken place, God's grace falls onto the congregation: 'Le grand mystère de la Rédemption venait d'être renouvelé, le Sang adorable coulait une fois de plus' (*RM*, I, 1223). The conducting of Mass by Mouret has moved the congregation from a state of sinfulness to receiving the grace of God by which original sin has been eradicated. Redemption has been granted by God, and 'le Sang adorable', Christ's sacrificial blood, is consequently worthy of being worshipped.

At this point, it is worth considering the theological significance of both the heart and blood. The heart is the 'principle both of virtues and vices [and] the special organ of the love of God', while blood represents 'the life principle, the soul, and rejuvenation'.¹⁰⁰ These are definitions by which Mouret lives his life as a priest, but when he becomes Serge in *le Paradou*, these meanings are inverted within the Naturalist environment. One by one, Zola undermines and naturalises the different aspects of this religious ceremony in the novel's subsequent events. The ritual of Mass holds original sin as an indisputable fact, and God's grace is the only thing which can bring about redemption. As will be discussed, Zola dismantles and ironises the various behaviours and fears of the believing Catholic pertaining to original sin. What Catholicism deems to be undesirable becomes desirable in Zola's Naturalistic world, and it becomes questionable as to whether original sin itself is as intractable a problem as believers would suppose. Importantly, Zola's description of Mouret's conducting of Mass

¹⁰⁰ 'Heart', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. by F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974; repr. 1978 with corrections), p. 623; 'Blood', in *Cassell Dictionary of Christianity*, ed. by Jean C. Cooper (London: Cassell, 1996), p. 32.

establishes the body as the carrier of sin and it is the spiritual life after death, symbolised by Christ's crucifixion, which offers a life without the taint of original sin. Christianity offers the spiritual life as an existence of purity, and the material life of humanity is unavoidably an impure life.

As a young seminarist, it is towards the spiritual life and its purity that Mouret aspires. However, his religious zeal is so extreme that he despises and fears his physical body and the material world around him. He focuses on his spiritual side to such a degree that 'on avait tué l'homme en lui [...], il était heureux de se savoir à part, créature châtrée' (*RM*, I, 1234). It is not just Mouret's physical nature that is to be despised, but more specifically his maleness. In the Garden of Eden, Eve's action of taking fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil led to the Fall of Man and the establishing of original sin for humanity. This 'reason' for man's sinfulness leads to Mouret's self-inflicted 'castration'. After all, if Mouret is not able to feel the passions of the flesh, or if he denies his physical nature, he is more likely to reach a state of metaphysical purity.

On leaving the seminary, Serge 'se sentait féminisé, rapproché de l'ange, lavé de son sexe, de son odeur d'homme' (*RM*, I, 1306). Mouret believes he has eliminated his physical nature and his maleness. Such a feat would endow him with the metaphysical nature of an angel, which is a purely spiritual being. It would be an unearthly existence which allows him to be free of original sin because he does not possess a human body. This also means that he becomes a desexualised being, since angels are neither male nor female.

It is the separation of the human and the metaphysical, and Mouret's wish to live as a metaphysical creature which causes him anxiety in living in the 'real' world. After the day's activities of going to le Paradou with his uncle Doctor Pascal and paying a priest's visit to the pregnant, unmarried villager Rosalie, Mouret reflects 'aux saletés de l'existence, aux poussées de la chair, à la reproduction fatale de l'espèce semant les hommes comme des grains de blé' (*RM*, I, 1273). For Mouret, the world of the flesh is connected with original sin, but he also sees humans and the world as 'dirty', and human desires are reduced to 'surges' of the flesh, so that human reproduction is as blindly 'fatalistic' as the cyclical growing of crops. Human passions and appetites are thus a product of the human body, which he believes is a site for evil.

Just before Mouret contracts the amnesia which is to transform him into his Naturalistic alter ego Serge, he feels an illness coming on, and wonders if 'peut-être les Artaud avaient-ils empoisonné le presbytère de quelque fléau abominable?' (*RM*, I,

1308). Mouret had gone to the village of les Artaud earlier, and believes ‘les sueurs humaines’ (*RM*, I, 1310) may have been blown over to the presbytery from these earthy villagers. It is a mark of Mouret’s extreme views that this potential contamination is on the scale of a plague by being described as a ‘scourge’. It is a contamination of the body, and the villagers are seen by Archangias and Mouret as nothing but their bodies, and consequently unholy. Archangias is virulently hostile toward the villagers, describing how ‘ils se conduisent en bêtes’ (*RM*, I, 1237).

As Mouret feels more unwell, he recalls seeing Albine for the first time in le Paradou earlier in the day:

Pourquoi donc riait-elle ainsi, en le regardant de ses yeux bleus? Il était pris dans son rire, comme dans une onde sonore qui résonnait partout contre sa chair; il la respirait, il l’entendait vibrer en lui. Oui, tout son mal venait de ce rire qu’il avait bu. (*RM*, I, 1310)

Mouret’s ‘evil’ has moved from being some kind of physical pollutant emanating from les Artaud to another kind, that of Albine’s laugh. Mouret has ‘breathed’ and ‘drunk’ it into his body, and it seems to have a living presence as it ‘vibrates’ inside him. This invasion of Mouret’s body exemplifies what he always feared: that the material world cannot be kept away from him. Of course, this is a bodily invasion of the most profound kind for Mouret because Albine is a child of the earth and, more specifically, a child of le Paradou. Her existence is purely of the body, just as with the villagers of les Artaud, yet she is also portrayed by Zola as pure. It is the influences of Albine and le Paradou which change Mouret into the Naturalistic Serge, and the ‘laugh’ of Albine is a Naturalistic challenge to Christianity’s ‘Word’ of God. Whereas the Word of God is part of a patriarchal, religious system, and the connotation is of fully developed human speech, Albine’s laugh is perhaps a linguistic disintegration of the Word of God and, as such, undermines the authority of Christianity. Le Paradou itself, the Naturalistic Garden of Eden, ‘avait eu comme un rire prolongé’ (*RM*, I, 1403) when it leads Albine and Serge towards the place of their sexual union.

Mouret’s drinking-in of Albine’s laugh is a first step toward his alter ego Serge’s developing of his bodily appetites. However, unknowingly for Mouret, Zola prefigures this reach towards a healthy human sexuality in Mouret’s worship of the Virgin Mary:

Alors, je monterai à vos lèvres ainsi qu’une flamme subtile; j’entrerai en vous, par votre bouche entrouverte, et les noces s’accompliront [...]. Ô Marie, Vase d’élection, chantez en moi l’humanité, faites-moi eunuque parmi les hommes, afin de me livrer sans peur le trésor de votre virginité! (*RM*, I, 1315)

Mouret's intention is absolutely innocent, but the ambiguity of the vocabulary suggests an unconscious desire for sexual union with Mary as he wishes to 'enter' her and desires the 'treasure of [her] virginity'. It must be remembered that Mary is without original sin, and she holds the paradoxical position of being a virgin mother because she conceived Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. But, although she is the mother of the saviour of the world in the eyes of Christianity, it is her female status which is mistrusted, especially by the fervent Archangias. The mistrust of the female is replicated within the figure of Albine because she represents the Naturalist Eve, and there are many who blame the biblical Eve's actions for the establishing of original sin. On Ricœur's terms, Albine would be abbé Mouret's temptation which leads to moral evil. This is amplified by Albine being drawn by Zola as an ironic modern-day Eve. This is a direct confrontation against Christianity's depiction of Eve as being the source of all humanity's moral woes.

Mouret feels very ill after an evening of paying devotion to Mary:

Cette nuit-là, lorsqu'il prit la lampe pour monter à sa chambre, il lui sembla que ses tempes éclataient: la prière était restée inefficace; il retrouvait, après un court soulagement, la même chaleur grandie depuis le matin de son cœur à son cerveau. (*RM*, I, 1296)

Mouret's discomfort is of the body, yet he seems to realise that this disequilibrium may reach beyond the purely physical. The unease may also have permeated his moral being because his prayer for purity had remained 'ineffective'. If Mouret had been praying to ward off evil, he was right to do so, because the physical ache connects his heart and his brain. This is the beginning of Mouret's naturalisation from a desired spiritual state. In making the Christian sign of the cross, the touching of the heart signifies the individual's belonging to God, so Zola's explicit connection between these two Christian symbols is significant. When Mouret becomes the Naturalistic Serge, he loses his memory of being Mouret, so the heat connecting his heart and brain presages this conversion into Serge, and a consequent move away from God. The physical symptoms represent Zola's moral dismantling of Mouret's religious apparatus.

If the heart symbolises faith in God in Christianity, it has just as much significance in Zola's Naturalistic context. As Mouret feels more and more ill he begins to suffer a light fever, which is the beginning of his amnesia. Simultaneously, he feels a surge of blood which is of such ferocity that 'il lui brûlait les veines' (*RM*, I, 1305). This revitalised body is caused by the heart's pumping of the blood, and is a precursor of

Serge's physical perfection in *le Paradou*. The heart and blood are vital to Zola's Naturalism, and Zola has appropriated and made anew these Christian symbols.

This bodily discomfort heralds the Christian Mouret's transformation as the Naturalistic Serge: 'Certains de ses organes avaient disparu, dissous peu à peu; ses membres, son cerveau, s'étaient appauvris de matière pour s'emplir d'âme' (*RM*, I, 1306). The change from Mouret to Serge is literally a physical one, with Mouret's internal organs disappearing. Mouret's brain is dissolving, and this would accommodate the fact of Serge's amnesia. His limbs and brain are being replaced by 'soul', so that the Christian division between the material body and the soul creating moral evil is no longer a problem. It is the combination of Serge's lost memory and newly physically vital limbs which allow him to reach physical perfection. In this transfiguration, the pure Christian soul has been naturalised in *le Paradou*. If we return to Canetti's theory, there is a parallel with internal organs being affected by evil: the Aranda medicine man needs to 'replace' his own in order to be able to ward off evil. Mouret's physiology has been changed by dint of his 'becoming' Serge, and the fact that his organs have either disappeared or been replaced by 'soul' means that original sin cannot take root. Similarly, in Ricœur's terms, moral evil cannot be possible if there is not a combination of soul and body because there would be no fault line from which moral evil would be possible. Therefore, the 'perfection' of Serge's body is because of the impossibility of natural evil, or Christianity's original sin, being present within him. Zola has taken Christianity's own symbols and concepts, and undermined their validity with his Naturalism.

Serge himself seems to be aware of the connection between illness and original sin. He speaks of the comfort derived from Albine's hand on his cheek: 'Elle [Albine's hand] a l'air d'entrer au fond de moi, pour m'enlever les douleurs que j'ai dans les membres. C'est une caresse partout, un soulagement, une guérison' (*RM*, I, 1318). Serge envisages that his revitalised limbs, strengthening with the influx of blood, are due to Albine's removing of 'pain' from his limbs. This pain, whether illness, or Ricœur's fault line, or Canetti's black magic, is reversed by the 'cure' of Albine's hand. The cure for Mouret's original sin is his physical revitalisation by 'becoming' Serge, an exaltation of his physical body which is counter to Christian theology.

As Serge becomes physically stronger in *le Paradou*, so original sin, in the guise of illness, begins to loosen its grip. Serge says to Albine: 'Je vais être tout neuf. Ça m'a joliment nettoyé, d'être malade' (*RM*, I, 1320). Serge himself refers to his collapse as an

illness, but the state of being ill will mean he will emerge as 'new' and 'cleansed'. Within the confines of le Paradou, the new Serge will be unsullied from the illness of original sin which afflicts Mouret beyond the walls of le Paradou.

Serge is nourished within the environment of le Paradou, Zola's Naturalist paradise. It is a 'real' garden, yet it still retains the mythical aura of the biblical Garden of Eden on which it is modelled. The milieu is part of Zola's Naturalist myth, where the cyclical seasons are connected with Serge's recovery: the approaching warmth brings the earth to life, and this, in turn, generates Serge's coming to life. The human body is a part of the natural world, and both require warmth and light to come into full vigour.

On a rainy, grey day Serge cries that 'l'hiver était une maladie de la terre, qu'il allait mourir en même temps que la terre, si le printemps ne les guérissait tous deux' (*RM*, I, 1321). For Zola, the principle of illness is as pertinent for the earth as it is for Serge: illness signals the decline towards death. However, the spring will 'cure' them both, or steer them towards life.

Eventually, the sun, Zola's pre-eminent Naturalist symbol, arrives in le Paradou. In *La Faute* the sun is the epitome of nature, and it is a cleansing and reviving force which drives the daily and seasonal cycles of the earth. These natural rhythms, the life force itself for Zola, have the power to eclipse the Christian symbols of evil of the Garden of Eden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. These traditional symbols are reduced to merely being *a* garden and *a* tree in Zola's hands. He invests them, however, with the power of life, which of course is the opposite of what they represent in Christianity.

This belief in the material as being without natural evil is equally applicable to Mouret's revitalised body. In Mouret's rebirth as his Naturalist alter ego Serge, he undergoes a metamorphosis as his deathly body begins to gather strength after his illness. Mouret is still bedridden after his fainting in church, and he wakes to find that he has been taken to le Paradou. Albine enters the room, draws apart the curtains and flings open the window. The letting-in of the light has a dramatic effect on Mouret-Serge:

Lui se leva, se mit à genoux sur son lit, suffoquant, défaillant, les mains serrées contre sa poitrine, pour empêcher son cœur de se briser. En face de lui, il avait le grand ciel, rien que du bleu, un infini bleu; il s'y lavait de la souffrance [...]. Il naissait. Il poussait de petits cris involontaires, noyé de clarté, battu par des vagues d'air chaud, sentant couler en lui tout un engouffrement de vie. (*RM*, I, 1323, 1324)

Mouret is in the process of a rebirth as Serge, so that the priest preoccupied with original sin is transformed into a man who is not tainted by this natural evil. In another instance of Zola's undermining of Christian symbols, he writes that Serge's heart is bursting with joy at the sight of the blue sky. This indicates that Mouret's allegiance to God through the symbol of the heart has been overtaken by Serge's allegiance to nature. Zola has conceptually reframed the heart as the organ that pumps blood around the body, and the body itself is a newly privileged entity with life pouring through it. Serge's rebirth is as of a newborn baby as he emits 'involuntary cries'. In the Naturalist context, this means that the baby Serge would be the first in the human race to be born without original sin. Instead of Ricœur's deathly fault line running through him, he feels 'a rush of life'. The supplanting of God and Heaven by nature seems to be total as Serge stares at 'le grand ciel'. As 'ciel' may be translated as either 'sky' or 'Heaven', Serge's commitment is now only towards the sky. The Naturalistic Serge is correct to look to the sky to 'cure' him of original sin because, as he stares at the blue distance, he is able to 'wash away' his suffering.

iii) Consciousness of evil

Ricœur believed that man is not only fallible, but fallen. To chart this transition from fallibility to fault, he embarks on what he calls a 'phenomenology of confession'. This is a 're-enacting' of the confession made by a religious consciousness in order to examine the experience from a philosophical point of view. Evil, then, does not become evil from the point of view of an individual who commits evil until at least the possibility of confessing it arises to consciousness (Simms, p. 21).

Serge is put into the position of having to acknowledge that he may have committed evil when he and Albine find a hole in the wall which surrounds le Paradou. Until that point, he had enjoyed his virile physique, but the hole in the wall has let in the outside world which can be viewed clearly from the Paradou side. When encountering the world outside, Serge becomes weakened:

Il se prosternait, il sentait les trois coups de l'*Angelus* lui passer sur la nuque, lui retentir jusqu'au cœur. La cloche prenait une voix plus haute [...]. Elle évoquait toute sa vie passée, son enfance pieuse, ses joies du séminaire, ses premières messes, [...] cette voix de l'église, qui sans cesse s'était élevée à ses oreilles. (*RM*, I, 1415)

Serge hears the ringing of the bell from his church, and his former life comes flooding back. Christianity is reasserting its grip on the Naturalist Serge because the tolling of the bell strikes him 'to the heart'. He hears the voice of both the clock and the church, and it can only be a step further before he hears the voice of God and believes again in the Word of God.

Serge's reversion back to Mouret has started because of this exposure to the outside world. Serge tells Albine that 'nous avons péché, nous méritons quelque châtiment terrible [...]. Écoute, je m'épouvante moi-même. Je ne sais quel homme est en moi. Je me suis tué, et j'ai de mon sang plein les mains' (*RM*, I, 1416). Serge's amnesia no longer allows him the freedom from being conscious of original sin. In Mouret's eyes, the actions of his alter ego Serge in partnering with Albine amount to committing moral evil. The horror of Mouret's situation is that he is the same person as Serge and will have memories of all his 'sinful' actions.

It is the memory of having been Serge that is torture to Mouret when Albine tries to persuade him to return to le Paradou: 'chaque mot d'Albine l'appelait: son cœur allait vers elle, tout son sang se soulevait, le jetait dans ses bras, avec l'irrésistible désir de baiser ses cheveux' (*RM*, I, 1463). This is a supreme fight between Christianity and Naturalism because Mouret is tempted by each word spoken by Albine, by his heart which goes towards her, and his racing blood. The word, the heart, and the blood are three symbols used by both Christianity and Naturalism, and it is a constant tussle in negotiating between the two sides for Mouret.

In his naturalisation of original sin in *La Faute*, Zola confronts Christianity with the mythological status of this evil. Abbé Mouret lives in genuine fear of it, and its naturalisation turns it to an illness which may be cured. Zola uses Christianity's own symbols of the Word of God, the heart, and blood, and creates Naturalistic alternatives which are affirmations of life. Those three Christian symbols constitute different aspects of the framework of original sin, and Zola's alternatives to these symbols lay bare original sin as a religious construction of myth. In that respect, he is offering a way out of the burden of evil that has been placed on humanity by Christianity.

iv) *Le Docteur Pascal*: science and the affirmation of life

Zola's naturalisation of original sin as a curable illness in *La Faute* is taken one step further in *Le Docteur Pascal*. The rebirth of Serge in le Paradou and the rush of blood and the life force through his body become a medical reality in the later novel when Doctor Pascal creates a liquid to renew life. His wish is to save his fellow man from unnecessary pain and suffering, so he may be viewed as a Naturalist protector from evil, thereby becoming a Christlike figure. Pascal's theory on heredity casts a benign light on the *fêlure* running through the Rougon-Macquart family. Whereas Christianity would have regarded this taint as an evil, like that of original sin running through generations of humanity, Pascal sees it as a biological accident which, in time, would correct itself. The promise of eternal life given by Christianity is an actuality in Pascal's Naturalism, but the latter version is a humanist concept and will continue to be an actuality as long as the human race exists. Through the figure of Doctor Pascal, Zola is providing a powerful counter-model to degeneration theorists such as Nordau.

Michel Serres considers Zola's use of contemporary science in *Le Docteur Pascal* as so fundamental that the natural and social history of the Rougon-Macquart family, which his naturalism wishes to depict, should be regarded as a 'protocole expérimental'.¹⁰¹ The *OED* defines 'protocol' in two ways: it is a detailed record of the observations made during an experiment, and also the detailed instructions for carrying out an experiment or course of medical treatment. Taking Serres's view into account, this would make Zola himself a scientist or a physician. His novel would then be a medical textbook giving a scientific account of what illness is, and would also serve as a guide to treatment for its eventual cure. Pascal's research on the genetics of his family acts as a framework and a 'fil' (p. 17) for the novel and the whole *Rougon-Macquart* series, linking the different family individuals over five generations. However, this family tree is, for Serres, both '[un] arbre de science [et] arbre de vie' (p. 36) because the genetic information relates to a living network of familial bloodlines. In the scientific mode, Zola's novel reproduces the themes of heat as life, appetite, and 'l'ascension et la déchéance' (pp. 40–41).

Serres regards Pascal — in the same manner as Pouchet and Michelet — as one who practises hylozoism, the doctrine that all matter has life. Generation of life from death as the movement of matter is 'le moteur [qui] se nourrit lui-même', supported by

101 Michel Serres, *Feux et signaux de brume: Zola* (Paris: Grasset, 1975), p. 16.

chemical and thermic foundations, but it is actually a ‘hymne à la seule valeur: la vie toute bonne et seule bonne’. Life is ‘la puissance motrice’ as it provides the means for a cure and also offers redemption in its perpetual movement. Pascal’s family tree should, then, be considered ‘[un] arbre du vitalisme, arbre de perpétuation, à perpétuité’ (p. 41). However, the tree takes on further symbolic value as Serres’s reference to Clotilde’s taking of Pascal’s research papers means that she is stealing ‘le savoir de l’arbre’.

As this scientific knowledge is also that of ‘[le] bien et du mal’ of the family physiology, the Rougon-Macquart family tree becomes the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the biblical Garden of Eden (p. 47). Pascal and Clotilde are figured as Adam and Eve, and also the biblical patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah (p. 51). For Serres, having ‘[é]criture dans l’écriture’ renders the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle as an example of legend. The twenty novels no longer tell the history of the Second Empire, but have expanded, instead, to constitute ‘la légende des siècles, les châtements, la bible de l’humanité’ (p. 52). Pascal has written his testament with his research papers, his ‘Nouveau-Nouveau’ Testament (p. 53), which follow the biblical Old and New Testaments. Serres considers the extension of a ‘local’ genealogy to the ‘global’ history of humanity to be a ‘displacement’ (p. 55), not a generalisation. In relation to the Rougon-Macquart family *tare*, and in a similar vein to Sophie Guermès, Serres identifies a scientific explanation in that the ‘knotted energy’ that constitutes suffering can be displaced to produce mechanical ‘work’, so that ‘[l]e médecin est ingénieur’ (p. 61). Health derives from a balanced system, and the *fêlure* represents entropy or ‘mort thermique’ (p. 63), which is the unavailability of a system’s thermal energy for conversion into mechanical work, often interpreted as the degree of disorder in a system. The *fêlure* is, then, an obstacle to the conditions which allow a balanced system.

In contrast to Serre’s approval of the melding of the scientific and the mythological by Zola, Françoise Gaillard considers that the naturalisation of the physiological *tare* by nineteenth-century scientific research on heredity, and its later conflation with the religious *fêlure*, to be a reinforcement of the bourgeois class structure. Both these discourses are informed by myth. The eventual mythical aspect of heredity was crucial in that it posited the idea of difference ‘naturellement’,¹⁰² which helped resolve the contradiction between the theoretical concept of post-Revolutionary equality within society and the inequalities observable within individuals. Gaillard

102 Françoise Gaillard, ‘Genèse et généalogie: le cas du *Docteur Pascal*’, *Romantisme*, 11 (1981), 181–96 (p. 186).

terms the need for a diversity of states and conditions as ‘une loi de l’ordre social bourgeois’ (pp. 186–87). She attributes the Rougon-Macquart family’s *fêlure* to tante Dide: it is a poison, and is the price to be paid for the spilt blood of Macquart and Silvère recounted in the first volume *La Fortune des Rougon*. There is ‘un crime antérieur’, never specified, of which these later crimes are merely a repetition, but Gaillard suggests that this was the guilt resulting from Dide’s adultery. The absence of a particular ‘moment de la chute’ proves, for Gaillard, that there is never any possibility of an historical response to the question of origin. Facts cannot fulfil the need for an explanation, so this has instead been assigned to fable (p. 188). She notes that Zola’s silence on the origins of the *fêlure* makes it akin to one of the great curses of classical antiquity whereby there is one individual who becomes the ‘maudit’. It is for this reason that the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle must be read as a mythical quest for the guilty as much as an historical enquiry into imperial society. Gaillard invokes the classical Greek spirit of punishment when she describes the new science of heredity as ‘la nouvelle déesse du châtement, la version positiviste des Euménides’. If heredity makes everyone guilty, then the haemophiliac Charles is the ‘victime émissaire’ whose blood could wash away the family’s flaw (p. 189). The ‘contamination’ between the discourses of genesis and genetics, in trying to uncover origins, made it possible to speak about genetics through the narrative model of genesis. This, of course, greatly assuaged the bad bourgeois conscience. How could it be possible to change the ‘position naturelle’, to go against the laws of nature? (p. 190). As heredity had been developed for better economic and social management, and not for the correction of difference, Gaillard notes that Pascal was naive in not understanding the ‘drame bourgeois’ which desired difference (p. 191). She is equally critical of Zola: by promoting the idea of a single process which drives the natural and social history of the Rougon-Macquart family, Zola is unwittingly supporting bourgeois ideology through the concept of the naturalisation of social phenomena (p. 194).

Pascal’s enthusiastic scientific research into heredity concerns his mother Félicité Rougon, who is ever-mindful of upholding the reputation of her family. For years, Pascal has been documenting the physiological oddities of family individuals, and has even created a family tree listing the personality and physiological traits of each individual alongside their birth and death dates. The physiology and personality of each individual is closely linked, and Pascal tries to trace types through different routes through the family tree. What might be called the family *fêlure* affects individuals

differently, and the documenting of this phenomenon is merely of scientific interest for Pascal. Félicité, however, is desperate for Pascal's research to be destroyed because if the contents were ever made public, the family would be dishonoured because 'les histoires vraies, les tares physiologiques de la famille' (*RM*, V, 929) would be known. Various Rougon-Macquart family members were in positions of great power under the Second Empire, helping to create much of the economic and political chaos which the period suffered. It was the presence of the family *fêlure* which propelled them to such social ambition or moral iniquity.¹⁰³ If Pascal's documents were made public, then that would be 'proof' that many of the Empire's ills could be blamed on many of the family members.

The knowledge that Pascal is gathering via his research is seen to be dangerous by Félicité and, moreover, an affront to Christianity: 'elle est jolie, leur science qui va contre tout ce qu'il y a de sacré au monde! Quand ils auront tout démoli, ils seront bien avancés!... Ils tuent le respect, ils tuent la famille, ils tuent le bon Dieu'. For Clotilde, Pascal's niece, the papers represent evil itself. Pascal discovers her burning the documents, and she is adamant that she must 'tuer le mal, l'empêcher de se répandre et de renaître!' (*RM*, V, 931, 997).

The consolation that Christianity provides is what Clotilde needs, as she explains to Pascal:

La vie est abominable, comment veux-tu que je la vive paisible et heureuse?... C'est une clarté terrible que ta science jette sur le monde, ton analyse descend dans toutes nos plaies humaines, pour en étaler l'horreur. Tu dis tout, tu parles crûment, tu ne nous laisses que la nausée des êtres et des choses, sans aucune consolation possible. (*RM*, V, 992)

Yet, as a scientist, it is exactly the close study of life which appeals to Pascal. He agrees with Clotilde that he analyses the 'horror' of humanity, but it is because he can then 'tout connaître et tout guérir!' (*RM*, V, 993).

For Pascal's formulation of his theory on heredity, his influences came from the work of real-life scientists such as Darwin and German biologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel (*RM*, V, 946).¹⁰⁴ Like these two naturalists, Pascal is also trying to study the

103 Examples include the moneymaking Octave Mouret in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, socially ambitious Aristide Rougon, later known as Saccard, in *La Curée*, and the murderous Jacques Lantier in *La Bête humaine*.

104 Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919) was a great champion of the natural historian Charles Darwin (1809–1882) whose theories he popularised. More people at the turn of the century came into contact with and were influenced by evolutionary theory through his many publications than any other source, including Darwin's own writings. He was largely responsible for fomenting the struggle between evolutionary science and religion. See Robert J. Richards, *The Tragic Sense of Life: Ernst Haeckel*

origins of life, which had been within the exclusive domain of religion until Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859. Until Darwin's breakthrough, the act of anatomising life would be seen as a sacrilegious activity. For Christianity, life is a gift from God and cannot be analysed in a scientific way. After all, the biblical Book of Genesis begins 'In the beginning was the Word', meaning that God created life, a fact which should not be questioned.

Pascal, however, interprets the subject of life from a scientific viewpoint. It is through his study of consumption that he begins to feel that he can rival God. He feels

la foi chancelante du médecin guérisseur, en le lançant dans l'espoir noble et fou de régénérer l'humanité. En somme, le docteur Pascal n'avait qu'une croyance, la croyance à la vie. La vie était l'unique manifestation divine. La vie, c'était Dieu, le grand moteur, l'âme de l'univers. Et la vie n'avait d'autre instrument que l'hérédité, l'hérédité faisait le monde; de sorte que, si l'on avait pu la connaître, la capter pour disposer d'elle, on aurait fait le monde à son gré. (*RM*, V, 947)

The vocabulary of religion has been appropriated by Zola in describing Pascal's 'faith' in being the 'doctor-curer' who wants to 'regenerate' humanity. In fact, Pascal would be rivalling God Himself if he believes he can cure humankind by ridding it of natural evil and original sin. Pascal's single 'belief' is in life, which is itself a 'divine manifestation'. He acknowledges that life is God, but, as a scientist, life is also the 'soul of the universe', with heredity as its driving force. Understanding and using heredity would shape the world 'as you please'. Pascal's wish to understand heredity would be no less than the wish to know the secret of life.

A 'perfect' humanity where there is no suffering, and therefore no natural evil, would offer people a status on earth that Christianity could only offer in the afterlife:

Ah! ne plus être malade, ne plus souffrir, mourir le moins possible! Son rêve aboutissait à cette pensée qu'on pourrait hâter le bonheur universel, la cité future de perfection et de félicité, en intervenant, en assurant de la santé à tous. Lorsque tous seraient sains, forts, intelligents, il n'y aurait plus qu'un peuple supérieur, infiniment sage et heureux. (*RM*, V, 948)

Pascal's wish for a perfect humanity, untainted by illness, original sin, and natural evil, would establish a secular paradise on earth. Although he understands that there is still daily scientific progress to be made before reaching this mythical point of the eradication of suffering, his vision resembles that of Christianity in seeing this state of perfection as something that will happen in the future. For Pascal and Christianity, faith

and the Struggle over Evolutionary Thought (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. xvii–xviii.

in such a state is so strong that an untainted humanity would seem to be tantalisingly within reach. Yet, in both cases, there is the quality of unrealisable myth, because the prospect of a perfect humanity, without suffering, seems improbable, especially if it is to happen in this daily life. Medical progress can only be taken so far, and reaching a state of perfection is perhaps confusing religious dogma with what is truly realisable.

As a medical doctor, Pascal would of course approach the creation of a perfect humanity through the human body. In his reading from a fifteenth-century medical text, Pascal discovers a technique on how to cure a diseased human organ:

Pour guérir un organe malade, il suffisait de prendre à un mouton ou à un bœuf le même organe sain, de le faire bouillir, puis d'en faire avaler le bouillon. La théorie était de réparer par le semblable [...]. Puisqu'il voulait régénérer les héréditaires affaiblis, à qui la substance nerveuse manquait, il n'avait qu'à leur fournir de la substance nerveuse, normale et saine. (*RM*, V, 948)

This theory of replacing weak organs with strong ones occurs in *La Faute*, when abbé Mouret becomes the revitalised Serge in le Paradou who has rid himself of his original sin. The same concept is used by the Australian Aranda medicine man, whose ability to combat evil is assured only after his internal organs are removed and replaced with a completely new set. For Pascal, Serge Mouret, and the Aranda medicine man, the eradication of natural evil is possible through strengthening the organs of the human body. Through his protagonists of the doctor and the priest, each of whom is associated with the physiological body and original sin, Zola is able to present natural evil as a curable aspect of the body. This moral regeneration is, then, enacted through the locus of the human body. As such, Zola offers a Naturalist perspective on how original sin as formulated by Christianity should be considered.

Pascal eventually concocts a liquid made of crushed sheep's brain and distilled water. After injecting himself with it, he finds that his energy levels have returned to those of a twenty-year-old. Pascal proclaims this as

cette trouvaille de l'alchimie du vingtième siècle, [...] la panacée universelle, la liqueur de vie destinée à combattre la débilité humaine, seule cause réelle de tous les maux, une véritable et scientifique fontaine de Jouvence, qui, en donnant de la force, de la santé et de la volonté, referait une humanité toute neuve et supérieure. [...] le sang régénérateur et sauveur du monde. (*RM*, V, 949, 950)

In believing that his new elixir is by turn a product of 'alchemy', the 'universal panacea', and the 'fountain of youth' which can eradicate all natural evil to produce a

superior humanity, the line has been blurred between reality, legend, and myth. Describing it as the ‘regenerating blood and saviour of the world’ gives it the same quality as that of the blood of Christ, so saving the world and humanity may be done by humanity itself with no recourse to God. Humanity has, thus, supplanted God in being able to provide redemption.

The magical aspect of the new potion is acknowledged by Pascal himself, when he asks Clotilde if she admires ‘ma liqueur de sorcier, qui réveille les morts’ (*RM*, V, 950). As he makes his rounds with Clotilde, his patients gratefully receive him

comme au sauveur, au messie attendu. Ces pauvres gens lui serraient les mains, lui auraient baisé les pieds, le regardaient avec des yeux luisants de gratitude. Il pouvait donc tout, il était donc le bon Dieu, qu’il ressuscitait les morts! (*RM*, V, 956)

Pascal’s patients regard him as Christ himself, saviour of mankind with his healing potion. However, the townsfolk also ascribe the mythical power of folklore to his powers of healing. As Pascal and Clotilde walk around town visiting his patients,

On aurait dit un de ces anciens rois qu’on voit dans les tableaux, un de ces rois puissants et doux qui ne vieillissent plus, la main posée sur l’épaule d’une enfant belle comme le jour, dont la jeunesse éclatante et soumise les soutient. (*RM*, V, 954)

Not only is Pascal seen by his patients as a Christlike figure, his powers of healing are such that he becomes a veritable vessel of healing on a mythical scale. As one of these ‘ancient kings’, he may even be considered similar to the legendary Fisher King whose personal health dictated the health of his kingdom and his people. The comparison of Pascal to a never-ageing king transforms him into a mythical figure. The ageing Pascal and the young Clotilde, who is the ‘child beautiful as the day’, at this point represent Zola’s principle of the eternal life force, which is a prominent theme in his work. In other parts of the novel, the mythical status of Pascal and Clotilde is continued when they represent — and actually become — the biblical King David and Abisaïg. Acting as a parallel to the story of Pascal and Clotilde, the ageing King David is presented with a young virgin, who is ‘si orgueilleuse d’avoir été choisie, si ravie de donner à son roi le sang réparateur de sa jeunesse’ (*RM*, V, 1078). Within the figure of Pascal, Zola is privileging the life force. Pascal helps his patients to live without suffering as a doctor, but, crucially, this renewal of life is imbued with mythology as he is able to offer a reinvigorating essence. Pascal, therefore, is not just providing physical well-being, but also moral health. The final part of this chapter discusses Zola’s

principle of life, which is a humanist eternal life offered as an alternative to that promised by Christianity.

v) *La fêlure* as natural evil

Zola's concept of the *fêlure*, which runs through the five generations of the Rougon-Macquart family, would be seen in Christian terms as a natural evil. In keeping with Zola's formulation of it as being of the body, Gilles Deleuze considers the *fêlure* to be 'le fil rouge des *Rougon-Macquart*', weaving its way through the family. It is a physiological pathway extending through certain individuals, and it manifests itself through conditions such as social ambition, homicidal tendencies, and alcoholism, to identify the most prominent. As with the degeneration theorists, Deleuze observes a close link between human physiology and society, as he describes the *fêlure* as 'l'instinct [qui] manifeste la dégénérescence' (Deleuze pp. 8, 9). The *fêlure* produces destruction and mayhem within the Second Empire, and, as a few of the protagonists who suffer from its effects are in socially influential positions, the chaos affects Second Empire society at a fundamental level. The proliferation of the *fêlure* through the generations may stem from the moral evil of family members who are afflicted by it. Thus, there is a vicious circle between the pathological illness and the society in which it exists: the illness perpetuates itself because of the social milieu, and the nature of this milieu has been largely created by individuals afflicted with the *fêlure*.

The span of the Second Empire coincides with the rise to social prominence of the Rougon-Macquart family. The Empire began with Napoleon III's *coup d'état* of 1851. Pierre and Félicité Rougon's desire to be part of the new political regime marks the start of the family's political and social machinations in the town of Plassans, the story of which is told in the first volume *La Fortune des Rougon* (1871).

The establishment of the *fêlure* intertwines with the ascendance of the Rougon-Macquart family and the Second Empire. If the political intrigue and treachery of the 1851 *coup d'état* is deemed as an immoral act, therefore an example of moral evil, then the *fêlure* is the consequent natural evil and punishment for the moral evil. It originates from the family matriarch Adélaïde Fouque, informally known as Tante Dide, and runs through the family bloodline and eventually, I suggest, it bleeds away in the fifth generation through the death by haemorrhage of the young Charles Rougon.

Studying his family tree, Pascal describes the importance of Tante Dide as the family matriarch. It is from her that the legitimate Rougon line and the illegitimate Macquart line come, both of which

avaient poussé de ce tronc, lésé déjà par la névrose. Les cinq générations étaient là en présence, les Rougon et les Macquart, Adélaïde Fouque à la racine, puis le vieux bandit d'oncle, puis lui-même, puis Clotilde et Maxime, et enfin Charles. (*RM*, V, 975–76)

The tree, as analogy, is very important in the *Rougon-Macquart* novels, and it mainly represents life, which is a key concept for Zola. Tante Dide is the ‘trunk’ and the ‘root’, and the four subsequent generations are the branches. The tree analogy physically connects family members with each other, and it is this corporeal connection through the bloodline that allows the *fêlure* to spread through the family.

By using the tree as an analogy of the family, Zola is also reminding us of the biblical tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. When Eve takes fruit from this tree, she begins the process of establishing original sin for the rest of humanity. Eve is considered by some as the origin of this evil, and Tante Dide is similarly the origin of Zola’s secular tree which disseminates the *fêlure*. Zola maintains the analogy by calling the fifth and final generation of the family ‘les brindilles dernières’ (*RM*, V, 1006).

In *Le Docteur Pascal*, Tante Dide has reached extreme old age, living in an institution, and is considered senile by her family. However, her mental state is not due to old age, but to

un choc moral terrible [qui] l’avait jetée à la démence. Depuis lors, depuis vingt et un ans, c’était chez elle un arrêt de l’intelligence, un affaiblissement brusque, rendant toute réparation impossible. Aujourd’hui, à cent quatre ans, elle vivait toujours, ainsi qu’une oubliée, une démente calme, au cerveau ossifié. (*RM*, V, 973)

This ‘moral shock’ occurred when her smuggler lover Macquart is shot by a policeman. It caused Dide to suffer an ‘arrested intelligence’ with no hope of reparation, and which has now advanced to having an ‘ossified brain’. Pascal explains that ‘toute intelligence, tout souvenir paraît aboli en elle’ (*RM*, V, 974).

A second violent incident, the shooting of Tante Dide’s grandson Silvère in the 1851 insurgency in Plassans, provides a second shock for the matriarch. Silvère is described as the ‘victime des haines et des luttes sanglantes de la famille’ (*RM*, V, 974–75). The ‘bloody’ hatred within the family and also within France’s political factions

creates violent acts, acts of moral evil which then translate to natural evil. The blood spilt during the *coup d'état* was through immoral political gain and, somehow, the retribution for this moral evil returns as an evil of the body in the guise of the family *fêlure*.

With the affliction of the *fêlure*, Tante Dide's descendants create havoc within Second Empire society, and it is described as 'la meute des appétits [qui] se trouvait lâchée' (*RM*, V, 1009). The *fêlure* is of the body, a natural evil, so it can only be expected that its effects are expressed as 'appetites'. Pascal speaks of his family tree as a historical document, with family individuals dispersed among society:

Elle raconte le second Empire, du coup d'État à Sedan, car les nôtres sont partis du peuple, se sont répandus parmi toute la société contemporaine, ont envahi toutes les situations, emportés par le débordement des appétits, par cette impulsion essentiellement moderne, ce coup de fouet qui jette aux jouissances les basses classes, en marche à travers le corps social... Les origines, je te les ai dites: elles sont parties de Plassans; et nous voici à Plassans encore, au point d'arrivée. (*RM*, V, 1015)

The Rougon-Macquart family members infected with the *fêlure* are like a disease 'invading' society, swept along by their 'appetites' through the 'social body'. The analogy is of unavoidable infection, which is often supported by Zola's descriptions of the 'fever' sweeping different social groups described in various of the *Rougon-Macquart* novels. For instance, the women in Octave Mouret's department store in *Au Bonheur des Dames* suffer the same fever as the miners in *Germinal*.

It is when Tante Dide's great-great-grandson Charles Rougon dies from haemorrhaging in front of her very eyes that she suffers her third moral shock. For a split second, Dide's memory is jolted, and she remembers the shooting of both Macquart and Silvère: 'cette lésion terminale de la démence, cette nuit dans le cerveau, sans réparation possible, n'était pas assez complète [...] de nouveau, l'oubliée vivait, sortait de son néant, droite et dévastée, comme un spectre de l'épouvante et de la douleur' (*RM*, V, 1105).

It is as though the shock of seeing Charles's blood is the trigger to remember past spilt blood. Tante Dide's 'dementia' can then be compared to a kind of amnesia, a condition which also affects abbé Mouret in *La Faute*. The violence of Silvère's death, symbolic of the wider political upheaval in the country in 1851, was an act of moral evil. The consequent natural evil has been unleashed in the shape of the *fêlure*. However, Dide's lack of memory of the violence of 1851 — a national moral evil — has

meant that the origins of the *fêlure* — the consequent natural evil — have been obscured. Sadly, when Dide is able to recall the past, it seems that the single moment of recollection is too much for her because she dies the next day of ‘une congestion cérébrale’ (*RM*, V, 1105). The sudden revelation of moral evil was perhaps too much to bear.

The death of Charles seems to mark the end of the *fêlure*. He is in the fifth and final generation of the family, and has an uncanny resemblance to Tante Dide, who is of the first generation. Between these two family members, the *fêlure* spans its emergence and demise. The *fêlure* has weakened Charles so much that his body was ‘un relâchement des tissus, si aggravé par la dégénérescence’, and the least brush would bring on a haemorrhage. Unfortunately, Clotilde’s ring accidentally grazes him, and this starts the bleeding. Drops of blood fall from his nose ‘dans l’usure lâche de la dégénérescence’. In at least two uses of the word ‘degenerescence’ in this scene, Zola is keen to highlight that the degeneration, or *fêlure*, from which Charles is suffering is itself ‘wearing away’. This natural evil, treated as a Naturalist phenomenon by Zola, is finally bleeding away from the Rougon-Macquart family bloodline after five generations (*RM*, V, 1094, 1102–03).

The atrophied state of Charles’s body is made clear when Zola writes that he is ‘pareil à un de ces petits dauphins exsangues, qui n’ont pu porter l’exécrable héritage de leur race, et qui s’endorment de vieillesse et d’imbécillité, dès leurs quinze ans’ (*RM*, V, 1104). The degenerative effects of the family *fêlure* has had a devastating effect on Charles. As someone who cannot endure the ‘execrable heritage of his race’, Charles is, at fifteen years old, the physiological opposite of his uncle Pascal, who is newly revitalised. For both characters, the myths of degeneration and of regeneration have material force. While Charles has fallen victim to the *fêlure*, Pascal’s scientific trust and belief in life has endowed him with the gift of physical and moral health for himself and others, and of such magnitude that it can only be understood as mythical. Charles is doomed to die, and perhaps the *fêlure* will die off with him. In depicting moral and physiological decline as reversible, is this Zola’s Naturalist attempt to counter the degeneration theorists of his time?

For Pascal the scientist, the disappearance of the *fêlure* is perfectly natural:

Les races dégénèrent. Il y a là un véritable épuisement, une rapide déchéance, comme si les nôtres, dans leur fureur de jouissance, dans la satisfaction gloutonne de leurs appétits, avaient brûlé trop vite [...]: ce sont là les rameaux derniers de l’Arbre, les dernières tiges pâles où la

sève puissante des grosses branches ne semble pas pouvoir monter. (*RM*, V, 1017)

For Pascal, the satisfying of the appetites that so ravaged some of his family is a force that burns itself out. As befitting a scientist, Zola expresses Pascal's thinking in Naturalist terms. The fifth generation of the family tree, the 'last branches', are so far from the trunk of Tante Dide in the first generation that the strength of the tree's 'sap' does not reach them, so creating delicate specimens such as Charles.

This Naturalistic alleviation of evil fosters Pascal's optimism about the ascendant progress of life in his scientific thinking:

Les familles sont l'éternel devenir. [...] Eh bien! l'espoir est là, dans la reconstitution journalière de la race par le sang nouveau qui lui vient du dehors. Chaque mariage apporte d'autres éléments, bons ou mauvais, dont l'effet est quand même d'empêcher la dégénérescence mathématique et progressive. Les brèches sont réparées, les tares s'effacent, un équilibre fatal se rétablit au bout de quelques générations, et c'est l'homme moyen qui finit toujours par en sortir, l'humanité vague, obstinée à son labeur mystérieux, en marche vers son but ignoré. (*RM*, V, 1017, 1018)

The drawing-in of blood from outside will strengthen family bloodlines, and it will ultimately 'prevent progressive degeneracy' in the 'eternal becoming' of families. It 'repairs breaches [and] erases flaws', and it is this that is important in upholding Zola's Naturalist counterargument against the degeneration theorists. As Paul Ricœur describes the 'fault-line' in man as the weakness which creates the possibility of moral evil (pp. 15–16), the eradication of this 'breach' means that the cycle of moral evil creating natural evil is broken. The natural life of humankind will progress without any likelihood of degeneration. However, Pascal does address what the *fêlure* might be: he concludes that it is inevitably an inherent part of life, so that 'tuer l'hérédité mauvaise, [c'est] tuer la vie'. If the *fêlure* is seen as 'bad heredity', then it is simply a case of an unfortunate mixture of parentage, rather than confirmation of natural evil. After all, Pascal believes that 'le mal n'était plus qu'un accident encore inexpliqué' (*RM*, V, 1042, 1210). There is, for Pascal, on the question of evil, always a naturalist explanation for it. This is in contrast to those who would consider evil to be an abstract concept which is situated in the realm of mythology.

vi) Eternal life

If Zola denies the authenticity of Christianity's original sin and resents its pervasiveness as a religious mythical construct, it is crucial that he provide an alternative mythology. His belief is that life lived by humanity is already an eternal life, but radically different from the one promised by Christianity. The simple act of living was

ce travail géant des hommes, cette obstination à vivre, est leur excuse, la rédemption [...]. Le port était sûrement là, attendant ceux qui ont perdu la foi aux dogmes, qui voudraient comprendre pourquoi ils vivent, au milieu de l'iniquité apparente du monde. Il faut vivre pour l'effort de vivre, pour la pierre apportée à l'œuvre lointaine et mystérieuse, et la seule paix possible, sur cette terre, est dans la joie de cet effort accompli. (*RM*, V, 1023–24, 1024)

Zola presents this lived life as an alternative to the eternal life offered by Christianity because living is its own 'redemption'. He promotes this as an appropriate attitude to adopt for those who have lost their religious faith as it provides a meaning to existence. He offers comfort in this life, and is not promising a better afterlife which may not even exist. For Pascal, Zola's spokesman, life 'était l'unique faiseuse de santé et de force' (*RM*, V, 1088), so living has also replaced God as a source of health and strength.

Pascal puts forward a scientific theory on the mechanism of life. His proposition is that 'le travail' is also a source of redemption for man: it is the scientific relationship between the human body and the environment. The state of perfect health for the human body happens when the individual takes in surrounding nature through their nerve endings, and the resulting sensations are transformed into movements, ideas and 'tonicité'. These, in turn, feed the body through the regular workings of the organs. It is within this interaction between body and nature that Pascal 'voyait de nouveau le monde sauvé dans cet équilibre parfait' (*RM*, V, 1178).

To create eternal life on earth for humanity, Pascal's theory of work is also applicable: 'les enfants continueront la besogne des pères, ils ne naissent et on ne les aime que pour cela, pour cette tâche de la vie qu'on leur transmet, qu'ils transmettront à leur tour' (*RM*, V, 1210). The act of living consists of generations succeeding each other, this being part of the 'task of life'.

Moving from a purely mechanical interpretation of life, Zola positions it as a direct challenge to Christianity by formulating it as hope for humanity. Living,

therefore, becomes an act of faith:

C'était une prière, une invocation. À l'enfant inconnu, comme au dieu inconnu! À l'enfant qui allait être demain, au génie qui naissait peut-être, au messie que le prochain siècle attendait, qui tirerait les peuples de leur doute et de leur souffrance! Puisque la nation était à refaire, celui-ci ne venait-il pas pour cette besogne? Il reprendrait l'expérience, relèverait les murs, rendrait une certitude aux hommes tâtonnants, bâtirait la cité de justice, où l'unique loi du travail assurerait le bonheur. [...] Et la vie continuerait malgré tout, il faudrait seulement patienter des milliers d'années encore, avant que paraisse l'autre enfant inconnu, le bienfaiteur [...]. Une mère qui allaite, n'est-ce pas l'image du monde continué et sauvé? (*RM*, V, 1219, 1220)

It is interesting to see that, although Zola is advocating a humanist eternal life, he is expressing it through the ideas and vocabulary of Christianity. Living was 'a prayer' to the 'unknown god', to the 'messiah' who would deliver the people from their suffering. Zola's prayer is double-edged, as it is both a moral and a political entreaty: the goal of rebuilding the nation is to create a city of justice. The doing of this work will secure 'le bonheur', which could be translated as both 'happiness' and 'lack of sinfulness'. But in the end, the image of the 'saved' world lies with the breastfeeding mother, a truly human image, and which represents the Naturalistic parallel to the iconic religious image of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus. The final optimistic image of life is at the end of the novel, in the description of Pascal and Clotilde's baby feeding at his mother's breast. The baby's arm is raised in the air, 'tout droit, dressé comme un drapeau d'appel à la vie' (*RM*, V, 1220). Life literally has the final word, as 'vie' is the last word of the novel, and *Le Docteur Pascal* is the final instalment of the *Rougon-Macquart* series.

In Zola's two novels *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* and *Le Docteur Pascal*, published eighteen years apart, there is a marked progression in his treatment of original sin, evil, and religion. *La Faute*, the earlier novel, focuses on and ironises the archetypal biblical story of the Garden of Eden and the figures of Adam and Eve, which are clearly recognisable to the reader. Zola wishes to lay bare the concept of original sin as a Christian construct, so his only option is to invoke the original mythical source in order to be able to establish his Naturalist alternative. The later novel offers a more robust confrontation with religion and God Himself, where science supersedes religion as the saviour of humanity. The battleground between Christianity and Naturalism centres on the human body: for the former, it is the vehicle in which original sin proliferates, and,

for the latter, it is the materialisation of what it is to be human. According to Zola, the human body should not bear the burden of original sin that Christian dogma has placed upon it. Although Zola is writing at a time that is seeing the waning of religion under science, he cannot shake off the remnants of religion, and nor does he need to. Christianity promises a perfect — or faultless — humanity, but Zola is also doing the same through Naturalist means, so there is no need for God or an afterlife. By continuing to reference Christianity, Zola is able to point out its utopian nature and the harshness of the burden of original sin, which secularists would claim may not even exist as an entity as Christianity has formulated it. As a Naturalist, Zola is concerned with the material, and his version of Christianity's eternal life through successive generations proposes a more realisable optimism. Original sin is the ultimate symbol of evil, and making reference to it in the *fêlure* running through the Rougon-Macquart family underlines the absolute corruption and decadence of the Second Empire. As with original sin, it is a seam of evil running through the social body, a natural evil caused by a moral evil. However, as Zola has demonstrated with the young Charles Rougon, it may only be a matter of time before the *fêlure* naturally ebbs away in future generations.

The eternal life of humanity that is envisaged by Zola depends on healthy procreation in the Third Republic. Jean Borie writes of the new principle of 'égalité naturelle', founded on the biological universality of the notion of man in the wake of the French Revolution.¹⁰⁵ The new regime — now free from monarchical and noble hereditary privilege — is constitutionally one comprised of 'des innocents' (p. 12). Borie notes that the figures of the Republican wife and child become a new symbol for France (p. 15), which he encapsulates in a quotation from Michelet: 'Il s'agit de la famille' (p. 26). The developing discourse of science supports Michelet's thinking, both in his antipathy towards the Catholic Church's stigmatisation of the body to its concept of original sin and its objective disproving of this very concept. Félix-Archimède Pouchet's work on female menstruation, which Borie calls 'une gynécologie militante' (p. 38), is one scientist who particularly influences Michelet as he 'ondoie la femme et la nettoie des stigmates accumulés criminellement sur son corps par des siècles de superstition cléricale' (p. 38). It is this scientific clarity which Borie believes leads to the veneration of women as 'la Grande Productrice' (p. 41). Another scientist, Lucas, was working on theories which maintained the idea of hereditary determinism, naturalised evil, and the implacable advancement of degeneration. One of Lucas's arguments was

105 Jean Borie, *Mythologies de l'hérédité au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1981), p. 11.

the 'l'empreinte indélébile' of the first 'possessor' of a woman, which marks the 'terroir maternel' (p. 47) and this brand continues through subsequent generations. In a reaction to Lucas's *L'Hérédité physique* (1847), Borie considers that the nineteenth-century project of 'le colonialisme féministe' valorised virginity to an extraordinary degree, so that 'une page blanche' was the goal (p. 48). The 'blank page' of feminine virginity was thus the aspiration towards the quest for the 'pristine'.

In his analysis of *Vérité*, published after the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle and during the Third Republic, it is clear how important it was for Zola to continue to write about the importance of the family and national unity. Andrew Counter explores Zola's use of the sentimental to reconceive political and civic relations after the Dreyfus Affair.¹⁰⁶ Counter considers Zola's use of sentimental tropes as innovative, but also profoundly flawed in their evasions, especially in relation to sex. This would seem to be a problem for *Vérité* as sex is central to the novel: it reconfigures Dreyfus's alleged treason as a sex crime committed by a monk, and sets out a utopian future that is constructed around a frank, humanistic model of sexuality. However, Zola chooses to eliminate the possibilities of eroticism in favour of a 'relentlessly normative, procreative heterosexuality' (p. 393). Counter notes Zola's strategic and political use of the sentimental in the final reconciliation scene of the novel when the teacher Simon, wrongly accused of the crime, is released from prison after a decade. He returns to Maillebois, and the reaction of the repentant townspeople suggests the possibility that an 'absolute emotional unanimity' might flow from an affair, 'Simon's or Dreyfus's' (p. 394). As Counter points out, this absolute consensus implies a 'progressive suppression of difference' (p. 395). Just as Zola had evoked the Dreyfus family *foyer* in his open letter to Lucie Dreyfus after the pardoning of her husband in November 1899 to promote national repentance and reconciliation (p. 391), Counter sees the same twinning of the 'tender charm' of family life and the debate between secular and Catholic schooling in Zola's novel. It is this coming together of the two which makes *Vérité* a 'didactic roman à thèse' (p. 395). For Counter, the novel proposes the model of state-family relations as the ideal form of civic relations in Marc's fantasy of 'une vaste réconciliation, un baiser général' for the people of Maillebois when he anticipates Simon's return (pp. 396, 397). In subsuming the individual into an undifferentiated affective community, Counter points out that there is no recognition of the erotic

106 Andrew J. Counter, 'A Sentimental Affair: *Vérité*', *Romanic Review*, 102 (2011 [2013]), 391–409 (p. 392).

overtones of the ‘pseudoincestuous kisses’ it promotes. Instead, Marc’s sentimental vision collapses the sexual, civic, and familial into a ‘single promiscuous synecdoche’, eliding all questions and tensions ‘in pursuit of a chillingly illiberal *pax gallica*’. In Zola’s erotic-sentimental reimagining of the political, Counter sees parallels with George Sand’s principle of idealism, which brings together the aesthetic and the political. As Counter observes, this represents a new mode of engagement for Zola on both issues, rather than an evasion (p. 397).

In another analysis by Andrew Counter, of a different Zola novel published after the *Rougon-Macquart*, Zola’s desire for a patriarchal family structure becomes more forcefully presented within the text. In his discussion of the homology between the homosexual and the anarchist in *Paris* (1898), Counter uncovers the work’s pathologising of the two which corresponds to the distrust of both during the *fin de siècle*. In conjoining these two figures, it is possible to understand better the ‘nature and function’ of homophobia more generally in the wider culture of *fin-de-siècle* France, a time when the patriarchal model of the family was the desired state.¹⁰⁷ In his article of 7 February 1895 in *Le Figaro*, which formed part of his ‘Nouvelle’ campaign against cultural decline, Zola wrote that movements such as Decadence and Symbolism heralded ‘les pires perversions intellectuelles et morales’. Counter identifies a ‘homophobic strategy’ in the implicit objection to homosexuality in Zola’s article, which he euphemistically calls ‘l’amour qui ne fait pas d’enfants’. When this is coupled with Zola’s characterisation of the decadent aristocrat Hyacinthe Duvillard in *Paris* who uses homosexuality as simply a ‘pose’, there seems to be, according to Counter, a concerted effort of denial or ‘aversion’ (p. 351). When three of the novel’s couples — representing the deviant groups of terrorists, political dissidents, and sexually degenerate aristocrats — all find themselves by coincidence at the same seedy hotel, Counter sees them as a *fin-de-siècle* ‘metonymic chain of pathology’. The repression of deviance continues within the novel when, in the same vicinity outside of the hotel, the anarchist Salvat is violently arrested by police. For Counter, this scene of intense physical contact appears to stand in for the acts of carnal excess which may be experienced by characters elsewhere. It is the text itself which dramatises the repression of deviance in the description of the arrest, with its free indirect discourse dissociating it from any individual character (p. 354). Salvat, then, becomes the ‘sacrificial, Christ-like

107 Andrew J. Counter, ‘One of Them: Homosexuality and Anarchism in Wilde and Zola’, *Comparative Literature*, 63 (2011), 345–65 (p. 346).

object' of a symbolic phobic violence directed at deviance in all its aspects (p. 355). Homosexuality negates procreation (p. 361) and is, moreover, an affront to the model of the family. In *Paris*, when Guillaume 'gives' his fiancée Marie to his brother Pierre, Guillaume decides to become a suicide bomber. Counter notes that the slightest loosening of family ties can provoke a 'potentially catastrophic withering of the moral sense', this being a *fin-de-siecle* nightmare (pp. 362–63). The complete negation and invalidation of both homosexuality and extreme political opinions in *Paris*, then, point to what Lee Edelman has termed 'reproductive futurism',¹⁰⁸ the politically all-consuming cult of the sacred child which demands the 'ascription of negativity to the queer' (p. 363). It is this sacred child, appearing at the end of *Le Docteur Pascal*, which acts as the symbol for a flourishing Third Republic.

¹⁰⁸ See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 4.

Conclusion

Zola's use of myth in his *Rougon-Macquart* series is a motif which is instrumental in revealing the overwhelming corruption of the Second Empire. The degeneracy of this period in French history was extreme, in Zola's eyes, and he identified myth as the ideal vehicle through which such decadence could be conveyed. It is through the mode of myth that Zola is able to address the subject of morality. Moreover, he is able to do so in such a way that it does not betray his Naturalistic aesthetic, despite the fact that myth ostensibly contradicts the scientific objectivity that this Naturalistic aesthetic implies. The meaning of morality in these novels, for Zola, relates to the workings of power within the Empire and their impact on the individual citizen. The wielding of power has moral implications, and its abuse leads to corruption, as Zola's novels show very clearly. Through myth, it is possible for Zola to show that the corruption becomes so acute as to become a material force of evil which affects individuals and the social and political structures of France.

The many references and allusions in the novels to Christianity's original sin — the archetypal symbol of morality and evil — would seem to be an unsuitable way of approaching the subject of immorality by a writer who espouses a Naturalist aesthetic which adhered to an atheistic, scientific objectivity. These religious references do not point to a failure of imagination in Zola, but pose, instead, a direct challenge to the very definition of morality that has traditionally been posited by Christianity. Zola's transposition of this religious, metaphysical concept into a Naturalist entity preserves the fundamental aspects of right and wrong, but he applies it anew to a modern context as the secular *fêlure* in his novels. The reader is always aware, however, of the shadow of religious original sin as a recognised provenance for the various forms that the *fêlure* undergoes in the novels. Zola's adoption and adaptation of this religious sign of sin and evil is, nevertheless, appropriate in his criticism of the Second Empire as it is based on the regime's profoundly immoral nature. This immorality, which manifests itself variously as political and economic corruption, degeneracy, sickness, and evil, touches all aspects of life under the Second Empire. Zola shows that the force of myth is palpable, because the individual living under the regime is adversely affected by these aspects of immorality under the guise of myth.

Tracking the same trajectory as the Christian project of redemption, the *Rougon-Macquart* novels exhibit a movement from evil to redemption from the first to the

twentieth volume, and this shift may be charted through the lens of myth. This mythical progression is what constitutes the 'reality' of corruption in the novels, so it is important that Zola is able to represent the nature of both evil and redemption. He does so by giving these usually abstract concepts a naturalist quality, so, in this way, he is able to show the 'real' nature of the immorality of the period. Zola's representations of redemption are based as much on material reality as his representations of evil. At the end of the twentieth volume, *Le Docteur Pascal*, the dissipation of the Rougon-Macquart family *fêlure* from the bloodline and Pascal's newborn son together attest to the salvation of the family. The natural evil has disappeared from the hereditary line, and the baby heralds a new start that is free of corruption. Redemption, for Zola, resides firmly within the human realm, as opposed to the afterlife, and is a life-affirming principle, both for the individual and, ultimately, for the nation. It is the healing of moral degeneracy, the restoring to health of the individual and the nation.

The question of how Zola views evil and represents its presence as reality in the novels is key. As a self-proclaimed Naturalist, it would be expected that he would be concerned with the tangible. As his novels demonstrate, the forces of politics and its social effects can be devastating so they should be treated as a matter of reality. In the case of Second Empire politics, it is essential that its corrupt nature, as Zola saw it, be revealed as a force of reality, with palpable consequences for its citizens. In his conspicuous references to Christianity's original sin, Zola is able to use it as a moral shorthand for denoting the deep corruption of the Empire. At the same time, however, his transformation of it from a metaphysical entity into the physiological *fêlure* makes it clear that there should be more than one way of conveying the notion of evil. For Zola, modern society should actively question the validity of the religious conception of evil. While morality is a timeless standard against which human behaviour should be judged, Zola believes that Christianity should no longer be the sole arbiter. The secular *fêlure* as an alternative to Christianity's original sin constitutes, then, Zola's endeavour to reframe the understanding of human morality from a religious context to a secular one to suit the modern age. Christianity's promise of redemption becomes, consequently, for Zola, a purely humanist matter. In the secular context, redemption is concerned with creating the best possible humanity, which may be as much of a mythical quest as in the religious context because of its seeming unattainability.

The secular nature of Zola's redemption places humanity at its core. It is a belief in the continuing moral vigour of humankind and in the value of humanity itself to

resolve its own problems. Crucially, however, Zola does not characterise secular redemption as utopian, but formulates it as moral via the mythical. While ‘utopia’ is an ‘imagined or hypothetical place, system, or state of existence in which everything is perfect’ (*OED*), Zola’s secular redemption does not aim to reach a state of absolute perfection. Instead, it is an article of faith for human morality. This secular approach stands in contrast to God’s redemption, which means being saved from sin so that a faultless state of perfection is reached. Zola’s humanistic approach dispenses with metaphysical evil, and instead, in opposition to the life-denying principle of Christianity’s original sin, Zola’s *bonheur* embraces human life and political change as the means towards redemption. This political change springs from human life itself, and forms a part of the process of organic human progression. Indeed, in line with his Naturalist aesthetic, the physiological nature of humanity and political life are intertwined, so that the vital workings of life within nature and the human body — *le travail* — contribute toward the salvation of humankind. As he writes in *Le Docteur Pascal*, Zola’s future child, a possible messiah, will lead the way in building the city of justice. Zola’s vision traces the same redemptive arc prescribed by Christianity, but, via the framework of myth, his is a humanist moral vision, in opposition to the utopian vision of Christianity. From a secular perspective, redemption through God is utopian in the sense that it is unattainable: it is the proposed saving of humankind from a possibly non-existent being. Zola’s vision of redemption, however, has a mythical quality which, although somewhat idealistic, has a more realisable aspect to it because it is based on the lived human life and on the human arena of politics.

Ultimately, Zola is advocating moving away from the religious framework which has traditionally shaped humanity’s moral conception of itself and which has acted as a moral point of reference for millennia. Instead of a metaphysical concept of redemption — an inexplicable and profoundly mysterious notion — Zola is proposing a humanistic approach that takes into account the organic rhythms of human life over the course of generations. The redemptive quality of Zola’s vision embraces human affairs in the form of politics, from which justice for all may emerge. His humanistic approach, whereby redemption is within the worldly realm, refuses the metaphysical improbability of Christian salvation. Secular redemption is concerned with human problems, while Christian redemption is concerned with the deliverance of a sin which has itself been conceived by Christianity. Zola’s absolute belief in humanity, his desire for a more moral society that is untainted by religion, as depicted by the mythical progression of

his *Rougon-Macquart* novels, is surely a literary support for his belief that a secular republic is the best form of government for France, as opposed to an empire. A republic, where citizens have a legitimate political voice, recalibrates the dynamics of power so that they are afforded the capacity to govern themselves. In his preparatory papers for *Le Docteur Pascal*, Zola refers to Pascal's baby son in the final scene of the novel, who embodies the possibility of political equality in the future:

C'est beau de fermer la série sur cet espoir en l'éternelle nature, en l'éternelle vie: espérer que l'être va naître qui recommencera l'expérience, qui sur le vieux monde caduc, en fera naître un nouveau, qui répondra aux aspirations socialistes et repeuplera les âmes.¹⁰⁹

The birth of Pascal's son represents hope for a new generation, but he is also invested with optimism for a new political structure for the nation. As Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* novels show, the corruption of power by a few individuals is socially corrosive, so his employment of myth to reveal oppressive power structures within the Second Empire is no less than an appeal for republican values. For Zola, only a healthy republic is able to deliver redemption for a nation.

Zola's privileging of the movement from evil to redemption from the first to the twentieth volume of the *Rougon-Macquart* demonstrates how he saw that the Second Empire operated within and through myth. The political and social ramifications of the regime's corrupt behaviour, as shown in Zola's novels, were of such magnitude that they could only be comprehensible as myth. For Zola's authorial purposes, myth acts as a vehicle for making sense of the often grotesque attitudes and abuses of power that were visited upon the individual. As chapter 2 illustrates, this is most clearly seen in the Second Empire's own myth of progress, which brutally suppressed and stigmatised the poorer classes within Paris.

If myth provides the means to deconstruct the immorality of the Second Empire, how is Zola the Naturalist to incorporate it into his novels? It would mean establishing myth as a viable methodology, an analytical tool for assessing the corruption of the Second Empire. Staying true to his Naturalist aesthetic, Zola treated myth almost as a scientific classification by conceiving it as an epistemology, so that it would be a conceptual framework for deciphering the knowability of reality. The mode of myth as an epistemological category would, then, offer a secure foundation for infallible knowledge, as opposed to mere belief or opinion. The mode of myth as epistemology

109 Cologny, Bibliothèque Bodmer, Dossier Bodmer, fols 226–231. Cited in Henri Mitterand, 'Notes', in Émile Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, pp. 453–71 (p. 471, n. 50).

consequently becomes a system and a valid framework with which it would be possible to discuss the myth of evil in the modern period. As a Naturalist, Zola would have found it difficult to include such a theme in his novels. However, it is possible for him to do so through considering myth as epistemology, so evil becomes a valid rationale for criticising the Second Empire. As many things that happened under the regime were so extreme, as chronicled in Zola's novels, their terrible moral effects could legitimately be said to approach a state of evil. It is, therefore, imperative that evil as a phenomenon can be seriously discussed and applied within a modern, secular context. As Zola's novels strongly propose, the political corruption and abuses of power of the Second Empire must not only be understood as historical fact. Zola's use of myth goes further in elucidating the depth of the immorality, unveiling hidden power structures, and revealing the moral consequences for the individual and the French nation.

The conceptual framework for myth in which Zola is able to depict evil is equally able to encompass redemption. In Zola's secular context, redemption means a recognition of and commitment towards the value and potency of human life and, coupled with this, the moral health of the nation. In his letter to Jacques van Santen Kolff of 22 February 1893, Zola writes of the ending of *Le Docteur Pascal*:

Il n'y a seulement rien là d' 'idéaliste'. C'est au contraire, selon moi, tout à fait 'réaliste'. La vérité est que je conclurai [*sic*] par le recommencement éternel de la vie, par l'espoir en l'avenir, en l'effort constant de l'humanité laborieuse. Il m'a semblé brave, en terminant cette histoire de la terrible famille des Rougon-Macquart, de faire naître d'elle un dernier enfant, l'enfant inconnue, le Messie de demain peut-être. Et une mère allaitant un enfant, n'est-ce pas l'image du monde continué et sauvé?¹¹⁰

In his expression of the great potential of humanism, Zola deliberately invokes the Christian image of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus as a traditional image of redemption. It is an indication of Zola's confidence in humanism that he considers his Naturalist redemption to be at least equal to the religious. It is still important, however, that he harnesses Christianity's definition of redemption because its essential morality is equally applicable to the secular context. As Christians believe redemption is the action of being saved from evil, this notion of being rescued from malevolence holds the same importance for Zola. Christian redemption suggests having reached perfection, a utopian state which is not appropriate in the secular context. Nevertheless, this still holds

¹¹⁰ Émile Zola, letter to Jacques van Santen Kolff (22 February 1893), in *Correspondance*, ed. by Bakker and others, VII: *June 1890–September 1893* (1989), 370.

meaning for Zola as ‘perfect’ for him means being without corruption, which is analogous to the absence of evil for Christianity. Zola exploits this duality of meaning between the religious and secular contexts when he invokes redemption in the healing of the degenerate French nation via the process of expiation through bloodletting in *La Débâcle*. Yet, Zola does not conceal the necessity to refer to Christianity’s own definition of evil and redemption. In *La Faute de l’abbé Mouret*, he is clearly writing about original sin as it is defined by Christianity, but this religious evil is then transformed into a naturalistic illness. The elision from religious evil to ordinary illness in *La Faute* — Zola’s refutation of redemption in the religious context — becomes, in *Le Docteur Pascal*, an affirmation of redemption in the secular context when it anticipates the advancement of humanity.

Within Zola’s epistemological framework for myth, the idea of myth may be traced through several, but related discourses: ontology; the aesthetic; the historical; the theological; and the scientific. These categories will be further outlined below. As myth is related through each optic, and frequently through several simultaneously, in the *Rougon-Macquart* novels, Zola’s notion of the Second Empire living within and through myth becomes apparent. Notably, we are able to view the regime’s political position as one that stems from myth. The consequence of this is that the French nation as a whole is subject to having to live within and through myth. The regime’s corruption, figured as Zola’s *fêlure*, then becomes the central concept through which the reader should perceive the Second Empire. The novels detail the political shortcomings of the time, but, through the lens of myth, the enormous underlying moral cost is made clear.

The discourse of ontology is important in understanding Zola’s use of myth as it is ‘the study of the nature or essence of being or existence’ (*OED*). Through this discourse, Zola is able to formulate his own concepts of what exists or is real. This is crucial as it intersects with his Naturalist aesthetic, which values the material. It also allows Zola to attribute an existence to concepts which are usually abstract, and demonstrate that they are of social construction rather than a priori concepts. Zola’s secular *fêlure* is a good illustration of this, showing how the immorality of the Second Empire spreads through society in different forms. At the same time, the *fêlure* serves as an indictment of Christianity in its own concept of original sin, and highlights that redemption must operate on a humanistic level if a morally healthy nation is to prosper. Corruption and evil, figured as the material *fêlure*, may be said to be ‘real’ as it is possible to perceive it,

as Zola portrays it in his novels. In this way, Zola is able to make the connection between the moral evil of the regime and the subsequent natural evil. By keeping this link between action and consequence, Zola is directly referencing Christian belief, and is quite possibly satirising it.

In addition to advocating myth as ontology, Zola also promotes myth as literary aesthetic because this allows him to exploit the more fantastical aspects of the Second Empire through invoking, for example, Greek tragedy, folk tale, legend, and epic. Greek tragedy is concerned with the mythological, storytelling, conflict, issues of life and death, and human nature and destiny. The epic narrates the deeds of legendary figures and, pertinently for the *Rougon-Macquart*, the history of a nation. Zola's particular portrayal of the physical weakness of Napoleon III in *La Débâcle*, a fictional account of an historical figure, has the air of legend, which is sometimes popularly regarded as an historical story but is unauthenticated, such is the level of myth that is associated with it. The entirety of the *Rougon-Macquart* depicts such a seemingly fantastical period in history that the folk tale does not seem too inaccurate a description of the novels. Zola's novels clearly delineate good and evil through myth: chapter 2 discusses the depiction of the character Nana as the very Devil himself, while chapter 3 focuses on the redemptive nature of Denise Baudu, figured as the mythical Medusa. The prominent forces of good and evil, and life and death, run through all of Zola's novels: the great significance and presence of these elemental powers in the text makes it possible to compare Zola's novels to fairy tales. Chapter 4 considers the specifically mythical aspect that Zola gives to these potent themes. All of these literary modes emphasise the extraordinary, verging on the improbable, and move from the grand sweep of history to the smaller vista of the personal. They are all narratives which incorporate morality with the study of humanity and its essence, and they encourage engagement from the reader or spectator through its shaping as story or chronicle. In addition, myth, as traditional story, frequently aims to explain a natural or social phenomenon so the *Rougon-Macquart* could be considered Zola's exposition of why the Second Empire failed so ignominiously. The recontextualising of myth to a modern context, especially of the Garden of Eden and the figures of Adam and Eve, demonstrates that Zola wanted to fully engage with the idea of myth as story. It is through the emphasis of myth as narrative that it is possible to lay bare the moral underpinnings of the story that the genre allows.

The notion of myth as story does not preclude Zola's wish to present the historical

through myth. Indeed, the historical may well be better understood through the mythical narrative. The Second Empire's aspiration for bourgeois material advancement is well expressed as a myth of progress. This economic expansion is historical fact, but it takes on a mythical dimension because there is the expectation that the progress will be eternal. This economic myth is part of the modernity constructed by the Second Empire. It is also a political myth because it only serves the interests of the bourgeoisie. The immoral side to this is the repression of the lower classes, who are relegated to the metaphorical and literal underground, as discussed in chapter 2. In the same way that eternal progress necessitates the eradication of the past, the lower classes, who represent the unprofitable past, are forced to move from the commercial centre of Paris during Haussmann's rebuilding of the city. While Walter Benjamin argued that politics maintained supremacy over history in his writing on nineteenth-century Paris, Zola's novels show that the Second Empire's manipulation of history *was* politics. As such, Benjamin's writing about the burying of authentic history in nineteenth-century Paris, which then becomes subject to myth, takes on an added dimension because the Second Empire's conception of politics as history is itself rooted in myth. The very idea of history becomes problematised through the Second Empire's political myth of eternal progress. In the end, Benjamin and Zola are both writing about the same thing: the deliberate suppression of the lower classes. If the poor are not visible in bourgeois-designated areas, then they are deemed not to exist. This social attitude relates to myth as ontology: if the lower classes cannot be seen, do they exist? Moreover, it becomes a political act to 'remember' the poor, which opposes the Second Empire politics which have created their own mythical time to eradicate the poor who cannot participate in bourgeois progress. In chapter 1, we have seen that the legend of Napoleon I is another historical reality which Zola draws upon. The Napoleonic myth is acknowledged as being a part of France's illustrious past, but Zola focuses on its degradation in *La Débâcle* where it takes on mythical power when such vigour is transformed into Napoleon III's degenerate political body. The deterioration is such that the sickness emanating from Napoleon III taints the French nation, with the result that it causes the downfall of France through its leader's degeneracy. Myth then becomes, for Zola, a way of expressing moral decay for a nation and its political leadership by means of the historical. The *Rougon-Macquart* cannot just be viewed as a chronicle of the Second Empire: Zola's use of myth reveals the moral stakes behind the historical figures and events.

Zola's use of myth through the discourses of theology and of science is extensive throughout the *Rougon-Macquart*, and both work in tandem with each other. While there are some references to non-Christian myth in his novels, it is, above all, Zola's references and allusions to Christian myth that strike the reader. The many allusions to the Garden of Eden introduce the notion of an innocent time when there was no corruption, but it is also the mythical site where natural evil for humankind was established in perpetuity by Adam and Eve. From Christianity, Zola transposes the idea of a place as the origin of evil to the modern Paris of the Second Empire. The Christian original sin has been transmuted by Zola into his Naturalist *fêlure*, which, as with the religious evil, has profound moral implications for the human. The parallel between religious original sin and Zola's *fêlure* is close: it is a seam of evil within the human body, the natural evil which is the consequence of moral evil. For both definitions, morality is at the heart because the abandonment of moral care has created each phenomenon. Zola's *fêlure* is not simply the symbol of immorality but it is immorality and corruption in material form, as befits his Naturalist aesthetic. In chapter 2, modern Paris, as the locus of Second Empire evil, is shown by Zola to be a city of evil because of the *fêlure* extending itself through the very foundations. Zola has, therefore, formulated his symbol of immorality to be spatial as well as mythological, while keeping Christianity's definition for its cultural force of recognition of what evil is. The establishing of natural evil as being of the body lets Zola depict the vicious forces of modern economic progress in a graphic way. In chapter 3, the women shoppers in *Au Bonheur des Dames* memorably suffer from extreme bodily and mental harm, while the decapitated women mannequins act as a stark warning of what happens to the human body under the commercial imperative. There is a closer resemblance to the Christian myth when, in *La Curée*, Renée bites the leaf of the cursed plant. The resulting natural evil, her 'mental crack', is a visible seam of degeneracy when she looks in the mirror.

In addition to expressing natural evil through the discourse of theology, Zola turns to the science of his day when he characterises the women shoppers and Renée as hysterics, being estranged of mind in both cases. More widely, the subject of degeneration serves as a background for the immorality of the Second Empire. This 'science' developed by Max Nordau connected the human body, society, and morality, foreseeing an end to civilisation if reason and morality were not strictly upheld. Although Zola was of the same opinion as Nordau about the necessity of morality in society, Nordau's hypothesis that *fin-de-siècle* artists and writers would precipitate the

fall of civilisation expresses an extreme view of how morality affects society. Nordau's science, based on a conservative value system, verges on the mythical because it promoted an idealised society which could be threatened by degeneration. Zola is also interested in the drive towards an exemplary and moral society, and we have seen how, when we consider Nordau's concept of degeneration alongside Zola's novels, we are able to decipher the hysteria and illness suffered by some of his characters as degenerative sickness, notably Napoleon III in *La Débâcle*. If the emperor is afflicted by a sickness which is borne of degeneration, his illness becomes more than just infirmity because, as the human body is connected to society, the French nation would be in danger of collapse. To compound this dire warning, Zola also assimilates the sickness to a state of natural evil to emphasise the fact that morality has been destroyed.

The sickness of degeneration via the discourse of science intersects with the discourse of theology when the sickness becomes a matter of morality. From the scientific discourse to the theological, the interconnection of the human body and the national body are of prime importance in Zola's depiction of redemption. As explored in chapter 1, in *La Débâcle*, the violence and bloodshed of the Franco-Prussian War, and then of the Commune in Paris, is a redemptive bloodletting which represents the expiation of national sins. By invoking this Christian concept, Zola is positing in secular terms what the religious thinker Joseph de Maistre had observed a century before in that the blood of the innocent redeems the sins of the guilty (Goldhammer, p. 9). France's degeneration, fused with natural evil by Zola, is of the body and it is only by physical means that this moral decay may be eradicated. In chapter 4, this idea continues in *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret*, when Zola confronts the theological basis for original sin by offering a Naturalist alternative. He reverses the Christian idea of the human body as being a site for evil. Instead, his character Serge, formerly the priest Mouret, is able to rid himself of original sin and enjoy his physical form. The 'cleansing' of the priest is shown by Zola as a rush of life through his body, which is the opposite of the mythological seam of death of original sin which Christianity had deemed previously to have been in his body. This transformation happens in le Paradou, an ironic version of the Garden of Eden, so, again, Zola is making a deliberate comparison with the Christian myth.

Zola portrays the original sin in Mouret's body as a physical illness to be cured, so that Serge's new strength indicates the absence of original sin. This correlation between illness and natural evil is the subject of *Le Docteur Pascal*, where Pascal has a scientific

interest in understanding the *fêlure* which has blighted five generations of his family. Yet, Zola treats science as a mythical discourse because Pascal's wish is to regenerate humanity by eliminating suffering, which is tantamount to eliminating natural evil. His goal is to create physical well-being, so that this translates into moral health. If he succeeds, then he will have created a state of perfection, which would be equal to the state of redemption for Christianity. Pascal, however, will have managed this as an earthly accomplishment, in contrast to Christianity's requirement for an afterlife. Zola sustains the comparison between Naturalism and Christianity by describing Pascal's scientific research through the mythical, describing Pascal as a Naturalist Christlike figure when he invents a potion which apparently reverses ageing. In the end, however, the *fêlure* is purged through naturalistic means through the haemorrhage of Charles Rougon. In Pascal's scientific logic, evil is an 'accident' yet to be explained, and is merely a product of unlucky heredity. With this evaluation between the natural and the religious, Zola has undermined a central tenet of Christianity.

The end of *Le Docteur Pascal* presents Zola's mythical vision of redemption. It traces the same path as Christianity in promising a future of justice and a state of deliverance, but Zola is describing a political and moral future on humanist terms. As with his other novels, the human body and society play a crucial part in this vision. It is 'le travail', the workings of nature and the human body, which will come together in equilibrium so that a state of redemption is reached. Living life is its own redemption, so that children will continue 'la besogne' of their parents. The natural continuation of the generations is what is needed to produce Zola's mythical future child messiah, who will build the city of justice. The perpetuation of humanity is, for Zola, a moral and political necessity. The end-point of 'le travail' will ensure 'le bonheur', which is a state of redemption because it is freedom from evil. Zola's mythical vision, in uniting humanism, morality, and politics, is a viable discourse for his faith in establishing the greatest prospect for good for humanity, and it acknowledges his commitment to the natural and the social. This humanist mythical vision is Zola's proposition for achieving redemption.

This approach of myth as epistemology, acting as an instrument of critique, is a paradigm which may fruitfully be applied to Zola's novels outside of the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle. Zola's vision of redemption in humanist terms continues through his next two series of novels, *Les Trois Villes* (1894–98) and *Les Quatre Évangiles* (1899–1903). These lie outside the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle that has been the central focus of

this thesis, but, nevertheless, merit careful consideration on how myth as a tool of critique may be applied to them. Critics have generally considered these later works as a new aesthetic direction for Zola because of their ideal and utopian nature, but I propose that it would be more beneficial to regard them as part of the mythical vision that had shaped the *Rougon-Macquart*. Indeed, in his letter of 7 June 1901 to Marcel Drouin in which he thanks him for his article on *Travail* which had appeared in *La Revue blanche*, Zola is clear about how he views the relationship between the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle and his later series:

De tous côtés, on m'accuse d'avoir changé de manière et d'aller contre mes œuvres anciennes. Aussi ai-je été très heureux et très frappé de vous voir comprendre que mes œuvres actuelles ne sont que le développement et comme la conclusion de leurs aînées.¹¹¹

While utopian suggests perfection, but is ultimately unreachable, myth allows for hope which is realisable, even if it is on an epic scale. Perfection, for Zola in the *Rougon-Macquart*, signified the absence of corruption and evil, and his later series are similarly concerned with these concepts on a humanist level. If the definition of redemption as nurturing human life and the nation is applied to the later novels, it is possible to see in them the presence of myth as political critique. Instead of being considered as novels that are ideal and utopian, through the lens of myth, they are, instead, novels which are rooted in human reality. In these later series, as with the *Rougon-Macquart*, Zola's concern was in emphasising the prime importance of the human rather than the divine or the supernatural. He stressed the potential value and goodness of human beings, and sought to solve human problems within the human realm.

Zola had intended a link between *Les Trois Villes* and *Les Quatre Évangiles* as Pierre Froment in *Paris* (1898), the final volume of *Les Trois Villes*, founds a family whose children will go on to be heroes in *Les Quatre Évangiles*. There is also a link of time between the two series, as *Les Trois Villes* deals with the present, and the later novels are concerned with the future. This allows Zola to write about current social problems, and then project a possibly redemptive future. There is also a movement from the demonstration of the Catholic Church's inability to provide solutions to worldly problems to a powerful non-religious message in the latter series of novels, which are Zola's secular gospels.

111 Émile Zola, letter to Marcel Drouin (7 June 1901), in *Correspondance*, ed. by Dorothy E. Speirs and John A. Walker, X: *October 1899–September 1902* (1995), 288–89.

Throughout the three novels of *Les Trois Villes*, there is a conflict between science and religion. The novels portray a Catholic Church that is unfit to solve the evils of the modern world. In *Lourdes* (1894), the doubting priest Pierre Froment is torn between his religion and his reverence of scientific knowledge that had been instilled in him by his father. He goes to Lourdes in an attempt to revive his faith, yet he gives scientific explanations for the miraculous cures that he witnesses. In *Rome* (1896), Pierre is unable to convince the Pope to renew the Catholic church so that it returns to being the religion of democracy. Finally, in *Paris*, the discord between religion and science becomes more striking with the priest Pierre and his brother Guillaume. The latter, conscious of social injustice, decides to protest by blowing up the Sacré-Cœur. The Church is portrayed as being synonymous with superstition and reaction, while Paris symbolises knowledge and science, synonymous with progress. There is hope of regeneration, however, at the end of *Paris* when Marie, a central female character, raises her newborn baby to the sky, apparently offering him to the city below. Recalling the end of *Le Docteur Pascal*, this could only be seen as good as the baby is part of a future generation which will redeem humanity. In contrast, Catholicism, as *Les Trois Villes* depicts it, is in no position to offer any justice for humanity or hope for the nation.

The impotence of the Church comes across most clearly in *Lourdes*. The town had been a site of Catholic pilgrimage since 1858 when a young peasant girl, Marie Bernarde Soubirous (St Bernadette), claimed to have had a series of visions of the Virgin Mary. It was also a site of national repentance after the Franco-Prussian War as those who wanted to restore monarchy chose Lourdes as the site for pilgrimages of national penitence.¹¹² At a time which saw a huge revival in religious belief, after a visit to the town, Zola was intrigued by the miracle healings that took place. Scott M. Powers writes of Zola's new understanding of individuals as *homo religiosus* in their willingness to embrace the unknown (Powers, p. 166), but ultimately, Zola, in *Lourdes*, aligns himself with Charcot's suggestions that many of the 'miracles' were a result of autosuggestion (Powers, p. 146) and also that faith healing was a psychosomatic transformation rather than divine intervention (Powers, p. 151). Instead of the assistance of divinity, Zola is proposing that these cures come from the individuals themselves and can be explained scientifically. In the novel, Pierre recalls Dr Beauclair's medical diagnosis of his friend Marie:

112 Scott M. Powers, *Confronting Evil: The Psychology of Secularization in Modern French Literature* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2016), p. 138.

Lui seul, après s'être enquis de l'hérédité de la malade, venait de soupçonner le simple état d'autosuggestion où elle se maintenait obstinément [...]. Une volonté brusque de se dégager de la notion fausse de son mal, une volonté de se lever, de respirer librement, de ne plus souffrir, pouvait seule la remettre debout, guérie, transfigurée [...], le miracle s'accomplirait.¹¹³

The very concept of autosuggestion is brought up by the doctor, and it is this psychological aid which Zola, through Dr Beauclair, is suggesting as the basis for the miracle cures.

In Zola's projection into the future, the great potential of the human is celebrated in *Les Quatre Évangiles*. These are Zola's secular gospels, which were envisaged as the progress of organised society in three distinct stages: the family (*Fécondité*, 1899); the city (*Travail*, 1901); and the state (*Vérité*, 1903). A fourth would be added to turn the series into a new Bible, *Justice*, which was never published and was to have described the union of all states into a single humanity. The names of the heroes of the four novels would have been Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.¹¹⁴ Distinct from *Les Trois Villes*, the *Évangiles* imagined a future France founded on liberal progressive ideals. Science would be used for humanist aims, and economic injustice and racism would be fought through education.¹¹⁵

Although idealistic in nature, Zola's *Quatre Évangiles* should not be considered as utopian. In his wish to advance humanity and the French nation, these novels should be regarded as redemptive texts in Zola's secularised understanding of the term. The notes that Zola had made for the unpublished *Justice* make this very clear. On the future role of France, he writes, 'Pour la sauver, qu'elle le redevienne. Non, son patrimoine de puissance et de gloire n'est pas là, il est avec nous. Expliquer': the only way to rejuvenate France is to look to the people, rather than to the institutions.¹¹⁶ Indeed, it is anti-Semitism and nationalism — 'le parti de réaction qui ne veut pas mourir' — which is holding back the nation as 'il tire la France en arrière' (*RM*, VIII, 1515). France will become a 'messie, rédemptrice, sauveuse' (*RM*, VIII, 1517) for the rest of the world if her mission to 'se renouveler' (*RM*, VIII, 1516) is accomplished. In order for France to go forward, Zola proposes that it should actively be 'contre le vieux monde du

113 Émile Zola, 'Lourdes', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Mitterand, VII (1968), 23–400 (p. 276).

114 A. A. Greaves, 'Émile Zola and the Danger of Optimism', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 4 (1969), 37–40 (p. 37).

115 Carmen Mayer-Robin, 'Justice, Zola's Global Utopian Gospel', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 36 (2007), 135–49 (p. 135).

116 Émile Zola, 'Pour Justice', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Mitterand, VIII (1968), 1515–20 (p. 1515).

catholicisme et de la monarchie' (*RM*, VIII, 1517). The way to do this is to return to revolutionary principles: 'Pour *Justice*, reprendre ma phrase: "Il faut que la France de la Révolution donne un jour au monde la Justice, comme elle lui a donné déjà la Liberté"' (*RM*, VIII, 1519). Zola's *Justice* may well be considered as the equivalent of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen of 1789. The document marked the end of the absolutist, seigneurial and corporate structure of eighteenth-century France, and was a proclamation of the principles of a new golden age, to be founded on an equality of rights, responsibilities and civic dignity.¹¹⁷ At the heart of the revolutionaries' optimism was the certainty of 'regeneration'. A new age of social harmony had dawned. The prejudice, corruption and misery all around them would dissipate in the blaze of virtue (McPhee, p. 82). On a political level, the reforms introduced or initiated in the first year of the Revolution were as ambitious as they were radical. Every dimension of public life was reworked according to the core principles of equality, popular sovereignty, efficiency, and humanity (McPhee, p. 118).

Zola's intention to revive the founding tenets of the Revolution would create a regenerated France, full of hope for the future because the old political institutions have been swept away. It is not a utopian message, as that suggests an air of unattainability. The notes for *Justice*, Zola's final secular gospel, articulate a redemption for the nation through political means.

The 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens by the National Assembly of France' was voted on 27 August 1789. The document was intended to be a preliminary statement of the principles around which the constitution would be framed. Of the seventeen rights stated, the aims of articles two to four could possibly realise Zola's notion of redemption through politics if they were acted upon and revived by France:

(II) The end of all political associations is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man; and these rights are liberty, property, security, and the resistance of oppression.

(III) The nation is essentially the source of all sovereignty; nor can any individual, or any body of men, be entitled to any authority which is not expressly derived from it.

(IV) Political liberty consists in the power of doing whatever does not injure another. The exercise of the natural rights of every man, has no other limits than those which are necessary to secure to every *other* man

¹¹⁷ Peter McPhee, *Liberty or Death: The French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 79.

the free exercise of the same rights; and these limits are determinable only by the law.¹¹⁸

Zola's three series *Les Rougon-Macquart*, *Les Trois Villes*, and *Les Quatre Évangiles* are concerned with the past, the present, and the future. In the *Rougon-Macquart*, he was writing about the Second Empire in the Third Republic, and in the second series, *Les Trois Villes*, he was concerned with present-day problems. In the third series, Zola finally invalidates the Catholic church by proposing his own secular gospels which set aside religion in preference for humanist methods of redemption through politics and national regeneration. The three series also represent a mythical movement from political despotism in the Second Empire to justice in the future, or from evil to redemption. Through the revival of French Revolutionary principles which Zola had formulated in his notes for *Justice*, France would once again have an optimistic future by means of its renewed political structure. Through the three series, Zola is expressing the sentiment that justice is as much a mythical goal as a political one, but at least there is some hope in reaching it if it is set within a humanist framework. It is only through social and political justice that humankind will be able to experience redemption.

118 P. M. Jones, *The French Revolution 1787–1804* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2003), pp. 114–15.

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